



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

URBANIZATION AND ORGANIZED CRIME

THE CHALLENGE TO
GLOBAL PEACE, SECURITY
AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN
THE URBAN CENTURY

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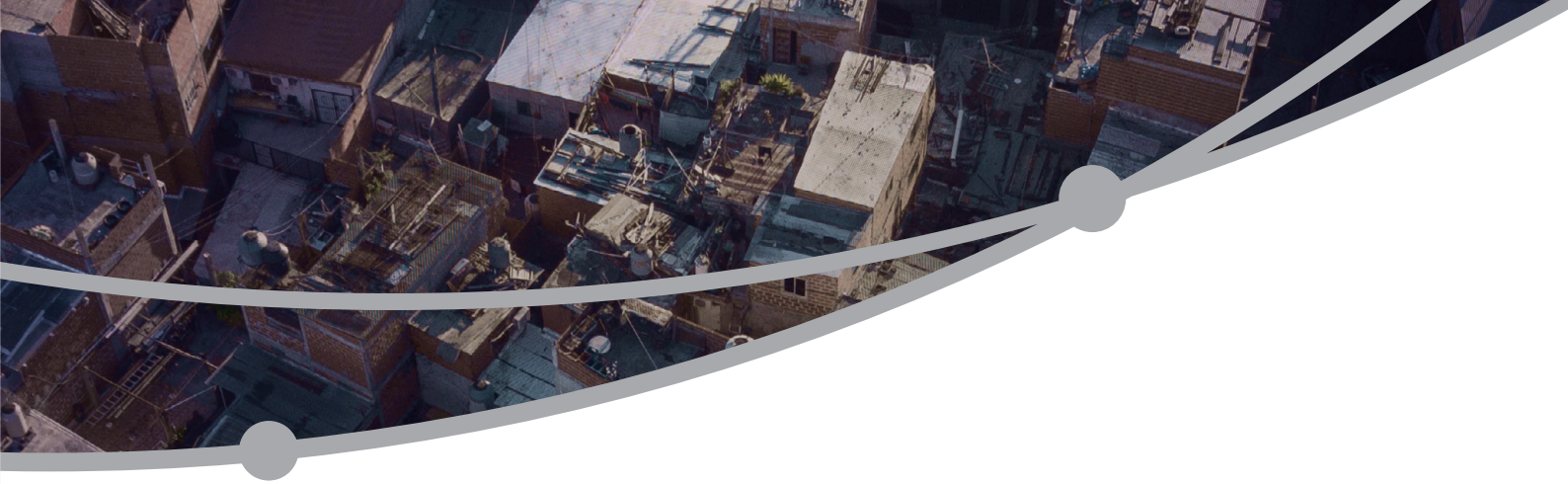
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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A weak rule of law is undermining urbanization in the Global South and paving the way for violence and human rights violations from organized crime. The growth of cities in size and population has been concentrated in some of the Global South countries that are least prepared to respond with sufficient mechanisms such as governance, infrastructure and law enforcement. Building peace, providing security, promoting human rights and reconstructing after conflict will increasingly require working within and collaboratively with urban areas. As such, urbanization challenges global communities working to promote peace and human security, together with the UN's sustainable development goals, to disaggregate their approaches and engage more with urban drivers of insecurity.

Given unprecedented demographic trends, this is an urgent task. Hundreds of villages and towns in low-income countries have been transitioning into veritable cities without a corresponding institutional infrastructure to guarantee security and human rights, such as policing, courts, prosecuting services, community support structures and infrastructure. Between 2020 and 2070 the number of cities in low-income countries is projected to grow by 76%.¹ Land area occupied by cities, which reflects both the growing number of cities and the expansion of existing urban areas, is forecast to expand by 141% in low-income countries. The deficits in managing this urbanization are clear: 56% of urban inhabitants in sub-Saharan Africa, a region facing rapid urbanization amid ongoing armed conflicts and organized crime, live in slums – a total of 230 million people.²

Organized crime tied to the urban space

This report examines the correlation between the Global Organized Crime Index scores for resilience to crime and the UN's rate of urban population growth for all 193 UN member states. The resilience scores have been assigned through expert-led assessments of the Organized Crime Index, developed by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

The correlations analysis in this report shows a moderate negative correlation (-0.56) between the 2020–2025 rate of change and 2023 resilience scores. This means that, in general, countries that are facing rapid urban population growth are also likely to be among the least resilient to organized crime. To put it another way, it is likely that countries where the urban population is growing at a higher rate also experience lower levels of resilience to organized crime.

This correlation says nothing about urbanization being a cause of low resilience or of criminality. Instead, the analysis aims to highlight the challenge of adapting security, human rights defence, peacebuilding and development mechanisms for the urban century.

Urban predation

Organized crime captures and absorbs some of the authority and economic functions that have historically made cities engines of economic and social prosperity. It makes even small and medium cities ideal nodes in global criminal flows that corrupt authorities, corrode public institutions and negatively affect communities' security and human rights. Rapid urbanization imposes market pressures on land and real estate markets that incentivize illicit appropriation of valuable urban space and dubious construction booms, undermining urban sustainability. Finally, organized crime deepens inequalities in the provision of rule of law, democracy and economic opportunities, with poor settlements being especially affected by predatory practices such as extortion, violent territorial control by armed groups and repressive police forces. Governments and state institutions are often part of the problem in alliance with criminal actors for profit, votes and power.

These forms of organized crime have in common the exploitation of the urban space and the socioeconomic deficits of dense settlements for predatory and violent practices. They result in the fragmentation of the urban environment by creating regimes of urban governance sustained through predatory relations with local communities. The power acquired by armed groups in these local authoritarian regimes, often through covert alliances with political actors in public agencies or legislative bodies, provides strong incentives for the continued marginalization of urban communities in ways that widen urban inequalities.

Adapting the multilateral system for the urban century

Policymakers must understand urban policy and planning as much more than local design tasks under the remit of specialized urbanists and architects. The trends highlighted in this report demonstrate how illicit economies and armed violence dynamics are tied to urban governance and development, and therefore pertain also to national and international strategies to prevent, manage and resolve conflict and violence.

Multilateral institutions such as the UN, development banks, NGOs and think tanks should engage with the security challenges of urbanization. In particular, international coordination and systematization is needed to communicate lessons learned about the role of the urban space within human rights and peacebuilding. Human rights watchdogs have increasingly highlighted the impact of local security policies and rapid urbanization on communities' access to justice, property rights and public services, especially accountable policing.³

At the same time, urban interventions can be a valuable addition to the international peace and security toolbox: the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) has seen positive effects from addressing and improving housing and land rights, which are often targets of criminal actors for illicit occupation of property in post-conflict cities.⁴ Recent research on the so-called 'local turn in peacebuilding' has shown that urban-specific interventions can engage with unique dynamics such as spatial inequalities among rival social groups, overwhelmed local service provision and overly repressive policing.⁵ These positive effects, however, must be scaled up enormously in the present urban age.

Figure 1 shows some of the key challenges that urbanization and illicit economies present to international peacebuilding, conflict prevention and human rights action. It outlines some proposed measures for urban adaptation.

With the technical support of international organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and UN-Habitat, governments should establish national urban security strategies to establish principles, develop and implement policies, improve resources and address gaps in staffing across local security forces. These plans would become key tools for local–national–multilateral cooperation on peace, conflict prevention and human rights.

POLICY AREA	URBAN ADAPTATION	RISKS LINKED TO ORGANIZED CRIME
Peacebuilding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Better understand how key urban features such as density, spatial inequalities, resource scarcities (e.g. water) affect peacebuilding and engage local actors (beyond national government) that can address them. ■ Understand intercommunal tensions and conflicts in cities (e.g. Jerusalem, Sarajevo, Belfast).⁶ ■ Support and amplify UN-Habitat's works to adapt peacebuilding interventions to urban areas (e.g. area-based approaches to gathering data and adopting participatory approaches).⁷ ■ Building urban resilience is a frequent area of focus, especially in reference to climate change, but needs to be adapted to address organized crime risks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mafias and gangs involved in resource management (e.g. water mafias). ■ Criminal groups or militias controlling urban territories and serving as gatekeepers for peacebuilders. ■ Powerful individuals (warlords, clan leaders, lawmakers) capturing infrastructure projects and infiltrating public institutions. ■ Police forces using overly repressive methods that antagonize vulnerable communities.
Conflict prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Disaggregate the data and analysis of conflict risks and actors from the national/regional level to account for specific hotspots within cities.⁸ ■ Address competition for power, land, security rackets and other issues at the local level, e.g. violent neighbourhoods.⁹ ■ Introduce planning and architectural interventions to improve living conditions and reconcile groups.¹⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Understanding the political economy of a city undergoing conflict or intense criminal violence requires attention to urban governance, politics and urbanization trends. ■ Criminal groups vying for power in cities often have deep-rooted criminal interests, so conflict prevention may need to encourage transitions from illicit to licit (formal or informal) economies.¹¹
Human rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Unmanaged urbanization threatens residents' access to healthcare, education, justice and other essential public services.¹² ■ Urbanization undermines access to housing and land on a global level.¹³ ■ Human rights organizations should work with national and local governments to facilitate access to land rights and property titles.¹⁴ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Criminal groups enforce so-called 'invisible borders' in marginalized areas and impede or mediate access of public agencies (e.g. electricity companies, sewage workers, teachers). ■ Criminal and militia groups (e.g. armed groups associated to politicians) often threaten – and sometimes assassinate – civil society leaders. ■ Especially in the Global South, police forces utilize firepower and confrontation in densely inhabited areas, and lack investigative capacities to root out organized crime.

FIGURE 1 Key challenges related to urbanization and illicit economies to international peacebuilding, conflict prevention and human rights.

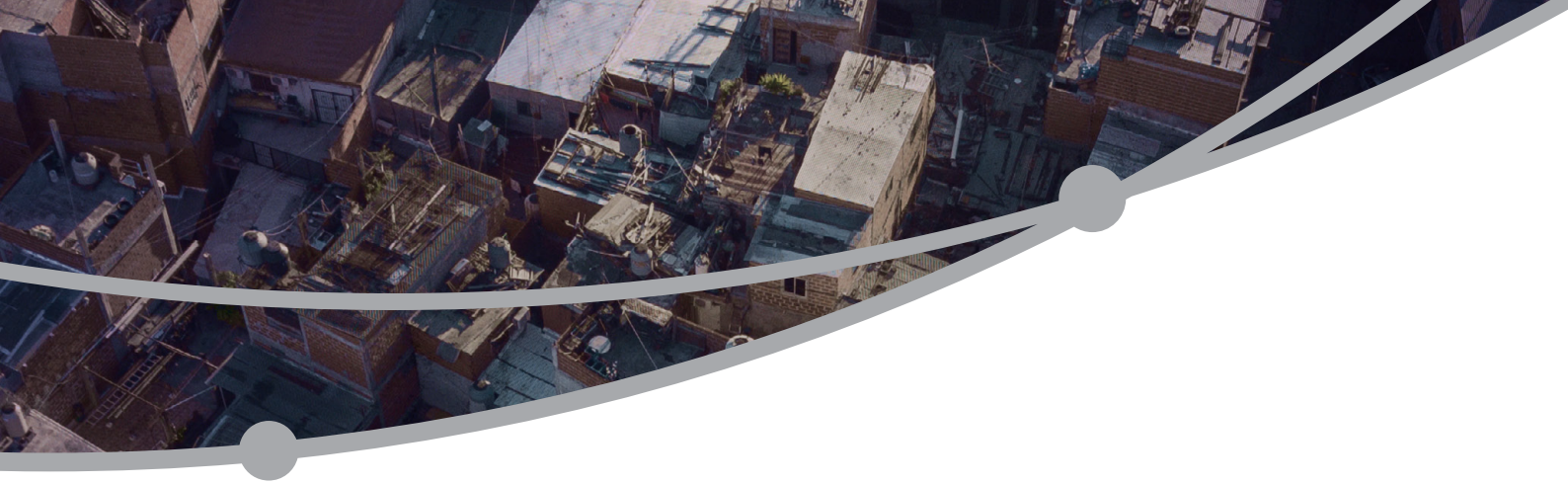
A call for multilateral action to protect urban populations

Urbanization, like other 'megatrends' such as globalization and the rise of AI, carries enormous prospects for economic and social development. But such megatrends can and have been leveraged by organized crime groups as tools for expanding illicit and often predatory practices. As such, rapid urbanization is a potentially positive trend that currently presents opportunities for the growth of illicit economies and predatory actors.

The report aims to raise awareness among multilateral agencies, governments, civil society and the expert community to the security and human rights implications linked to rapid urbanization. This adaptation to an increasingly urban world comprises a crucial challenge for local, national and international actors in our urban century.



A view of Luanda, which, during the Angolan conflict, experienced one of the most rapid population influxes seen in sub-Saharan Africa. © Anthony Asael/Art in All of Us via Getty Images



INTRODUCTION

Rapid urbanization is both a well-known challenge and a severely underestimated one. Making cities safe, resilient and sustainable by 2030 is one of the sustainable development goals agreed to by all UN member states. Studies have described urbanization in Asia, for instance, as ‘unprecedented’.¹⁵ The private sector has called rapid urbanization one of the 21st century’s ‘megatrends’,¹⁶ while journalistic accounts have predicted the growth of cities in coastal West Africa into a single megalopolis with 40 million people.¹⁷ Rapid urbanization is not necessarily a negative phenomenon; well managed cities can lead to economic and social development.¹⁸ But responses from national and municipal governments have been grossly insufficient in several fast-urbanizing regions, with severe gaps in urban development investment and management capacities across the Global South, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁹

Lacking rule of law and neglected public services have damaged opportunities brought by urbanization in the Global South, paving the way for human rights violations and expanding illicit economies. The need to adapt security provision and peacebuilding in today’s ‘urban century’ is driven by increasing evidence of urban vulnerabilities to human-made threats, such as the armed conflicts affecting cities in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as climate change. A more insidious, if sometimes less headline-grabbing, urban vulnerability is linked to organized crime. Recent scholarship has unveiled the immense value that cities pose to criminal organizations. This is caused by the rising value of land and real estate, the strategic value of ports and airports for transnational illicit flows, the opportunities linked to the illicit provision of services such as water, cooking gas and internet services, and the ubiquitous security rackets and extortion schemes that impose heavy duties disproportionately on the poor.

In conflict-affected and fragile countries, the expansion of villages and small towns into cities has created a new geography of vulnerability. In the Lake Chad region, rapidly expanding villages have placed their growing populations at risk of raids and looting by radical Islamist groups.²⁰ Even when armed violence is not explicit, coastal cities or border towns become magnets for conflict economies, helping to prolong violence and predation on communities.

There has been a small but growing community of experts calling for a more strategic and holistic view of security in cities. It goes beyond narrow and technical approaches based solely on policing or repression and considers issues such as social integration, urban planning and inclusive public institutions.²¹ An equally necessary shift lies at regional and international levels, where organizations such as the African Union, the UN, development banks and donor countries can promote a broader discussion about how to build not only effective security forces but responsive and coordinated

policies to address transnational challenges at the local level. These challenges include organized crime and the variety of armed groups (including state-linked actors) involved in it. National and international organizations working on issues such as conflict prevention and peacebuilding remain predominantly focused on engaging with central state agencies, lacking perspectives from cities and offering solutions with limited thought about urban environments.²²

Part of the problem has been linked to siloed approaches: urban development is rarely factored into analyses of institutional fragility linked to violence or conflict.²³ This separation is short sighted because – as Jaideep Gupte and Steve Commins explain – ‘cities are central to the processes of state consolidation, transformation and erosion’.²⁴ Peace and security policies such as security sector reform, conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction, peacebuilding and peacekeeping that ignore the specific social and political challenges of cities may involuntarily heighten vulnerabilities among marginalized urban areas and reinforce vicious cycles of short-term security approaches focused on repression of armed actors and communities.²⁵

This report shows how urban insecurity is linked to broader national and international trends, how rapid urbanization heightens some human security risks, and why it requires urgent attention beyond local stakeholders. Mayors, local governments and local civil society have often led the design and implementation of prevention and responses to violence, but they alone cannot cope with the pressures associated with the magnitude of rapid urbanization on the scale discussed here. This research report lays out the ways in which rapid urbanization affects the political economy of organized crime, expands opportunities for illicit economies and imposes significant challenges for governance and security provision for thousands of new and expanding towns and cities.

Urbanization in the 21st century

Urbanization is far from uniform globally, but its unprecedented scale in some of the countries most affected by institutional fragility and armed conflict undermines global efforts for peace and security. Several policy and academic studies have raised awareness about the magnitude of global urbanization. The share of people living in cities (settlements with at least 50 000 inhabitants)²⁶ doubled between 1950 and 2020, increasing from 25% to 50%. Urban areas host 56% of the global population, which is expected to grow to 68% by 2050 – a further 2.2 billion additional urban residents.²⁷

These trends provide an insight into the magnitude of the challenge. What is less well-known is the heightened challenges facing smaller urban areas: between 1975 and 2015, the number of cities in sub-Saharan Africa tripled from 523 to 1 640, while in the Middle East and North Africa it

quadrupled from 193 to 788. Globally, the number of cities doubled overall to 10 303.²⁸ Between 2020 and 2070 the number of cities in low-income countries is projected to grow by 76%.²⁹ As such, many towns today with less than 50 000 inhabitants will expand into veritable cities, requiring the service and infrastructure to enable this shift. Land area occupied by cities, which reflects both the growing number of cities and the expansion of existing urban areas, reflects the uneven growth of cities globally: city land area in low-income countries will expand by 141% while the growth in high-income countries will grow by 34%, according to UN estimates.³⁰ The scale of urbanization in some of the countries least prepared to cope with this transition suggests that a huge challenge lies ahead to sufficiently adapt policies and governance, including security provision and strategies against organized crime. ■

Why cities are crucial for peace and security in the 21st century

Attention to urbanization's impact on peace and security is needed due to the specific forms of armed violence and organized crime linked to cities.

Urban areas attract organized crime because of the wealth they generate, the value of urban space for illicit activities and the infrastructure connecting them to global markets. As prominent conflict theorist David Kilcullen has observed, much of this century's urban population growth is concentrated in coastal areas and characterized by connectivity of both licit and illicit goods and services.³¹ This trend positions cities as ideal nodes in global criminal flows that corrupt authorities and public institutions and corrode communities' security and human rights. A further challenge is the geographical concentration of these risks in poor and often informal settlements – precisely the ones most marginalized from institutional protection mechanisms such as accountable police, courts and service providers. As Alexandra Abello Colak has argued, armed violence is far from being an exclusively urban occurrence, but when it occurs in urban areas the dynamics of violence 'are unavoidably related in their drivers, intensity, manifestations and consequences to the layout of the city and the socio-spatial processes that shape urbanization'.³²

Tackling urban forms of violence involves some level of intervention on the urban spatial form – which means that peacebuilding, human rights and violence prevention initiatives need to engage with urban themes. This may seem obvious but, especially in the areas of peace and security, international actors tend to view national governments as partners and target audiences. It is important also for policy-makers to understand urban policy and planning as much more than simply local design tasks under the remit of specialised urbanists and architects. The trends highlighted in this report demonstrate how illicit economies and armed violence dynamics are tied to urban governance and development, and therefore pertain also to national and international strategies to prevent, manage and resolve conflict and violence. Through planning and socioeconomic development, the urban form endures for decades or even centuries, and therefore influences many different areas of policy.³³

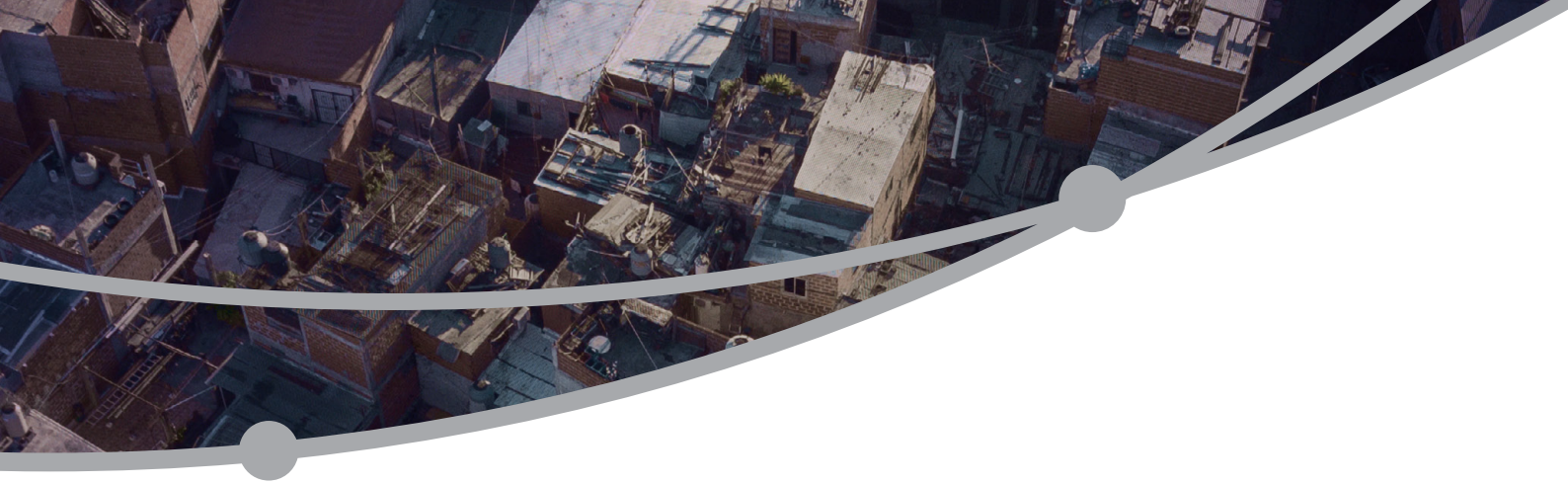
Adopting an urban lens to consider insecurity and illicit economies can illustrate how trends manifest across urban systems, expanding to and from small towns to megacities. Cities and towns are part of a broader chain of social, economic and political interactions that flow to and from urban, peri-urban (semi-dense areas surrounding an urban cluster) and rural areas. Vulnerabilities in one 'node' of this urban system can spread quickly to other nodes if they are connected (as they increasingly are) as part of trade and social networks. The GI-TOC has shown how non-state armed groups in the Lake Chad region predate on small, growing towns and roads connecting the urban system to larger cities such as Maiduguri (Nigeria) and Maroua (Cameroon), impacting regional and national economies and human security.³⁴ Risks extend to other critical areas for human security: with communicable diseases, development on urban fringes has been found to encroach on natural ecosystems and increase the risk of zoonotic diseases passing to humans.³⁵

The report's central message is that rapid urbanization – as it is currently taking place in most of the Global South – strengthens illicit economies linked to predatory armed groups and imposes institutional challenges to governments in ways that undermine human rights, peacebuilding and the achievement of global development goals.

Roadmap for the report

The report will explore these trends in three sections. The first section explores the correlation between rapid urban population growth and vulnerability to organized crime. It correlates data from the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index with UN data on urban population growth. This data analysis reveals a global negative correlation between urban population growth and resilience to organized crime: countries facing rapid urban growth tend to have lower resilience to organized crime, though levels vary between regions and categories of countries. Conflict-affected countries, for example, face particularly rapid urban growth amid very low resilience. The section also examines the expanding roles that cities assume in global illicit markets and the challenges of adapting governance and security provision in fast-growing cities.

The second part of the report considers the growing challenge of resource provision in cities and how this trend strengthens illicit economies and armed groups. It examines criminal markets linked to land and real estate, showing how the increasing number of urban residents vying for limited land can strengthen the hand of land mafias. The third section turns to conflict-affected and fragile settings, which face particularly rapid urbanization rates. It also examines the vulnerability of small, secondary and new cities to crime and conflict economies.



ORGANIZED CRIME AND SECURITY DEFICITS IN THE URBAN CENTURY

The 21st century has been widely called the ‘urban century’.³⁶ The UN’s Population Division estimates that the global population became predominantly urban for the first time in 2007.³⁷ This contrasts with the 20th century, when the global population was estimated to be 13% urban.³⁸ Rapid urbanization is not a new challenge to humanity, but it is one that has been mismanaged and under-strategized. An estimated 1.6 billion people today – 20% of the global population – live in what the UN considers to be inadequate housing. At least 1 billion people within this group live in slums. The current pace of urban development investment undermines the collective ability to meet the UN’s sustainable development goal 11, which focuses on sustainable cities and communities.³⁹

Urban population and area growth are taking place at a particularly rapid pace in low-income countries, while the same trends have now stabilized in higher-income countries in Europe and North America (which already have relatively high urbanization rates). Consequently, some of the countries with the least resources and many that are undergoing or recovering from armed conflicts will be those facing the increased pressures of rapid urban expansion. Other well-known risks pose additional challenges for both urban development and security, namely the effects of climate change. Sea level rises, for example, are predicted to significantly disrupt high-density coastal settlements this century, as discussed later in the report.⁴⁰

Urbanization and resilience to organized crime

This section analyzes the correlation between urbanization and resilience to organized crime, underlining its implications for peace, security and human rights. It analyzes resilience scores for all 193 UN member states and the UN’s average annual rate of change of the urban population by country – the rate of urban population growth. The criminality and resilience scores have been determined by expert-led assessments from the Global Organized Crime Index, developed by the GI-TOC. Resilience, according to the Index, is a country’s ability to withstand and disrupt organized criminal activities through political, economic, legal and social measures.⁴¹ Resilience scores are given on a one to 10 spectrum, where one is the least resilient and 10 is the most resilient.

The ensuing correlations analysis (Figure 2) shows a moderate negative correlation (-0.56) between the 2020–2025 rate of change and 2023 resilience scores. This means that, in general, countries that are facing rapid urban population growth are also likely to be among the least resilient to organized crime. This is visible in Figure 2, with the average resilience declining as urban population growth rates increase.

While this relationship was moderate on a global scale, the levels of correlation varied across continents. Only the Americas (-0.52) and Asia (-0.50) showed correlations between the two variables that are comparable to the global results.

It is interesting to note the low correlation between states' ability to withstand organized crime and the growth of the urban population in Africa. The link between the two in the region was estimated to be relatively low, at -0.31 , meaning that there is a correlation between rapid urban population growth and low resilience, but not as strong as in Asia and the Americas. While urbanization brings its unique set of challenges, for Africa that connection is perhaps not as pronounced because of the across-the-board lower levels of resilience. Despite a slight improvement in 2023, Africa is still on average the least resilient continent globally, 0.49 points behind Asia. Arguably then, while urbanization is indeed somehow related to states' ability to withstand the impact of organized crime, the resilience issues facing Africa are deeper and multifaceted. African countries facing relatively lower urban population growth also experience low resilience, but the correlation is still significant enough to indicate that – generally in the continent – urban growth is taking place amid low resilience.

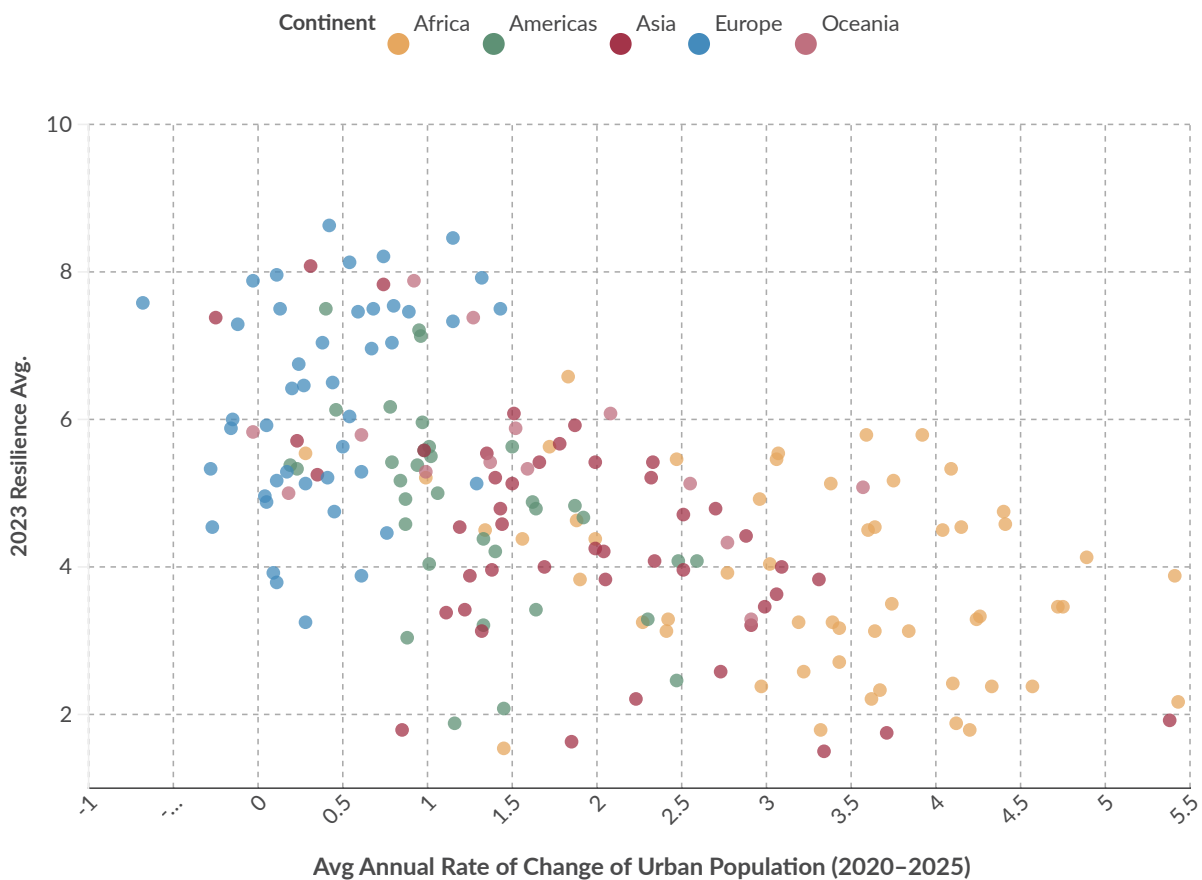


FIGURE 2 2023 resilience vs average annual rate of change of urban population (2020–2025).

SOURCES: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Organized Crime Index 2023: A fractured world, 2023; UN-Habitat, World cities report 2022: envisaging the future of cities, 2022.

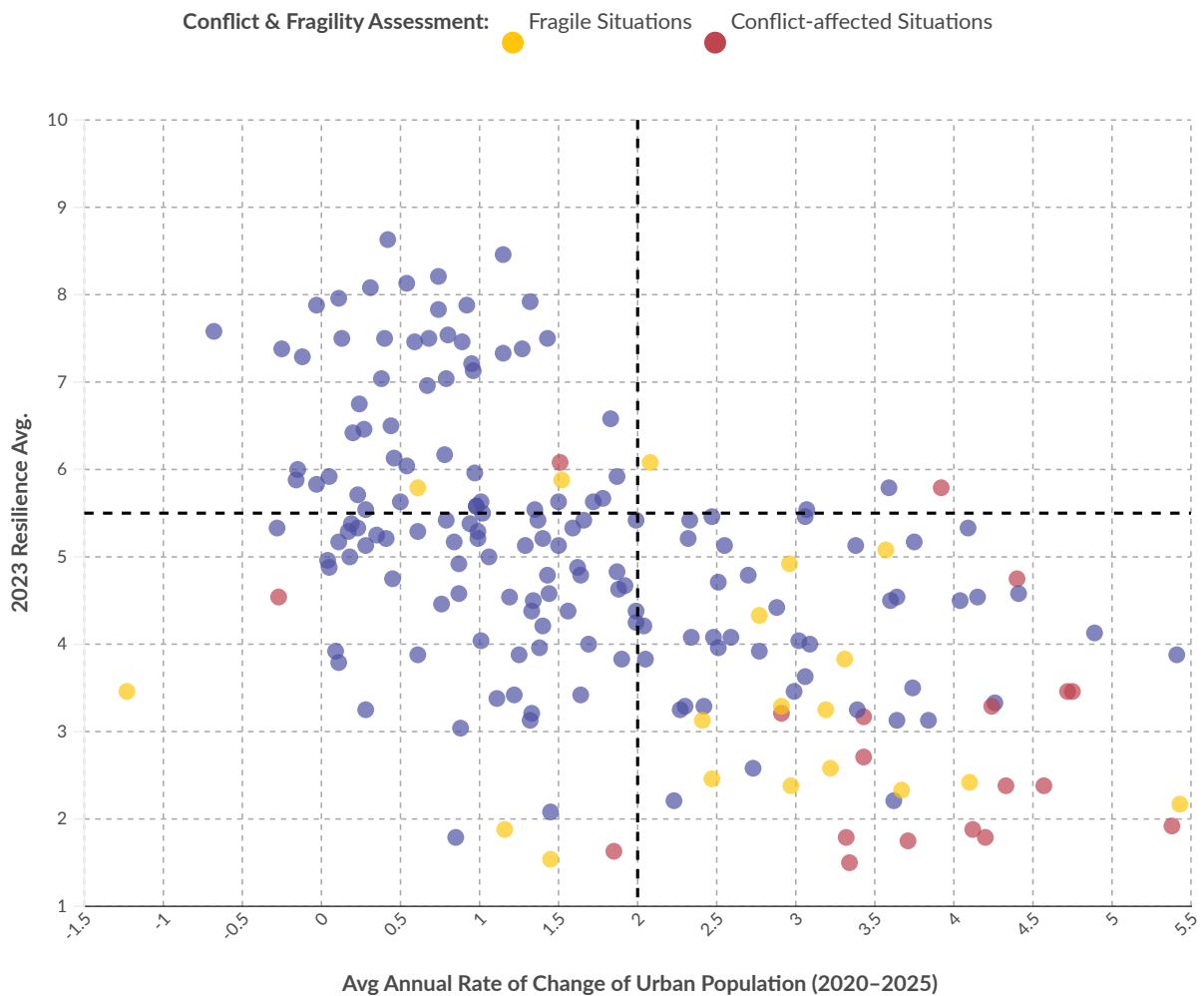


FIGURE 3 Urban population growth versus resilience to organized crime in conflict-affected and fragile settings.
 SOURCES: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Organized Crime Index 2023: A fractured world, 2023; UN-Habitat, World cities report 2022: envisaging the future of cities, 2022; The World Bank, Classification of fragile and conflict-affected situations.

Figure 3 shows this correlation focused on conflict-affected and fragile countries following the World Bank’s classification.⁴² The separation by quadrants reveals that 68% of fragile countries and 79% of conflict-affected ones are concentrated in the bottom right quadrant, facing rapid urban population growth and low resilience to organized crime. Worryingly, the upper right-hand quadrant is almost empty, reflecting the fact that few conflict-affected and fragile countries facing rapid urbanization have a high resilience to organized crime.

It is important to point out that these relationships do not necessarily speak to the causes of criminality or resilience, nor do they allow for speculation as to whether or not criminality or resilience are caused by urban population growth.

The goal of this comparison is to illustrate the challenge in terms of public administration and policy-making, since it provides a glimpse of how rapid urban growth is concentrated in some of the countries least prepared to manage this process through investment and capacity building in efficient criminal justice institutions and governance mechanisms.

Organized crime and the governance of urban spaces

There is a broad consensus that cities have historically had an important role in supporting their countries' economic development because of their nurturing of industrial activities and the economic benefits of agglomeration.⁴³ But there is another consensus emerging in terms of contemporary urbanization that sees it as having a reduced – sometimes significantly reduced – positive effect on development.⁴⁴ Economists Remi Jedwaba and Dietrich Vollrath studied gross domestic product (GDP) and urbanization trends since 1500 and found not only that 'correlation between urbanization and development has been falling demonstrably over the late 20th century when compared to the historical experience', but also that the boom in city size in the Global South during the second half of the 20th century has not been accompanied by corresponding rises in living standards; many cities like Lagos, Jakarta and Delhi grew very large and remain poor.⁴⁵ Global South cities have often grown amid 'low productivity, tepid job creation, high informality, huge infrastructure and service gaps, [...] increasing inequalities, growing environmental damage and vulnerability to climate change'.⁴⁶

The process of rapid urbanization amid relatively disappointing economic growth and untapped gaps in institutional capacities have taken place amid a globalization of illicit trade. Transnational organized crime expanded particularly over the 1980s and 1990s, partially facilitated by expanded global flows of goods and services and the opening of several markets to global trade, such as China, India, Russia and Eastern Europe.⁴⁷ The focus on globalization and the global flows through which the transnational illicit trade moves has to some extent eclipsed the role of nodes in this expansive web. In its influential 'Globalisation of Crime' report, UNODC focuses mostly on the shift in organized crime from hierarchical structures to 'loose networks', but also points out the loss of control to organized crime by authorities in many urban centres.⁴⁸

Evidence from regions where both urbanization and organized crime have expanded more or less at the same time points to a deeper relationship, lying mainly in the governance of these expanding cities. In Latin America, neoliberal development models spread during the 1970s and 1980s with a focus on rolling back the role of the state in social development and increasing that of the private sector and public-private partnerships.⁴⁹ This period overlapped with extremely rapid urbanization, which occurred much earlier than in Africa (which is currently urbanizing more quickly), due in part to large rural-to-urban migrants in search of manufacturing jobs.⁵⁰ In Africa, structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s prioritized investment in rural economies, but resulted in a sparsity of urban investments and a growing urbanization of the population amid continued urban poverty, contributing to the widespread growth of informal economic markets that remain important sources of livelihood today.⁵¹ In Africa, the informal sector accounts for 76% of the total employed workforce, more than the global average of 43%, according to the International Labour Organization.⁵²

Informality and lack of urban investment have been highlighted in both Latin America and Africa as symptoms of a broken social contract. The World Resources Institute has estimated that two-thirds of urban dwellers in the Global South are under serviced by municipal infrastructure, pushing them to 'rely on informal or alternative arrangements to procure core services such as housing, water, sanitation, transport and energy'.⁵³ Whereas some communities are able to manage these needs through informal and equitable arrangements managed by civil society organizations, many other vast urban spaces have those collective problems managed for them by armed actors that charge high prices (sometimes more than in middle class areas), use threats and violence to push competitors out and enforce rules.



Residents of Mathare, Nairobi, are subjected to criminal governance. At the same time there are also wells of civic resilience found in such settlements. © Richard Blanshard/Getty Images

Informal settlements such as Mathare, in Nairobi, are sources of immense social resilience, entrepreneurship and creativity. But many of their residents are also vulnerable to criminal gangs and shadowy mafias that control key public services and infrastructure. When I visited the area in 2019, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, I heard several accounts about how gangs were controlling and taxing the public toilets in an area where many households lacked those facilities, and how water provision there is often more expensive than in more affluent areas of Nairobi.⁵⁴ Willingly or not, these communities are within what Diane Davis has described as alternative communities of loyalties built on 'spatially-circumscribed allegiances and networks of social and economic production, relying on non-state armed actors for protection and resolution of everyday conflicts'.⁵⁵ The result is a further splintering of the social contract in urban spaces, with areas of formal and accountable institutions and areas where non-state (armed) actors operate with interests 'not necessarily coincident with the nation-state'.⁵⁶

Cities play many roles in the value chains of organized crime. Some global chains have a corrosive impact on security provision and governance patterns of urban areas, especially in the case of drug trafficking. The case of Karachi, Pakistan, is emblematic of this role as the city's port, the most important in Pakistan, which has been a crucial hub for the export of heroin originating in Afghanistan for a global market.⁵⁷ During a particularly intense bout of armed violence involving ethnic-affiliated gangs and militias in the city approximately between 2008 and 2013, a study pointed out that 'local crime groups became connected to the international drug trade [...] converting petty criminals into feared drug traffickers' in the neighbourhoods of Lyari and Sohrab Goth.⁵⁸ Through the immense profit of a global illicit drug trade, and helped by ethnic-political alliances in the city, gangs, especially those linked to Pashtun communities, expanded their involvement in real estate through evictions and coerced local populations with a heightened level of armed violence.⁵⁹

A similar combination of global and local criminal trends is currently affecting the Ecuadorian coastal city of Guayaquil. Homicides increased fivefold between 2017 and 2022,⁶⁰ including brutal displays of



Guasmo, Ecuador, near the port of Guayaquil, is at the confluence of local and global violent organized crime.

© Ceibos/Wikipedia

violence such as decapitations, bodies hanging from bridges and bombings.⁶¹ The global connectivity of the organized crime flows affecting the city seems to have played a role in the spatial concentration of the violence in the southern neighbourhood of Guasmo, located next to Guayaquil's port.⁶² Guasmo lies at the intersection of global organized crime and local criminal governance and as such poses profound policy challenges that local or even national authorities cannot fully tackle by themselves without international cooperation.

Fragmented authority in cities

Patterns of urban violence vary widely but they are almost always accompanied by the intensification of boundaries, usually invisible, separating areas of alternative political and economic relations: rival gangs in Chicago or Cape Town, militias controlling vital national infrastructure in Libyan cities such as Tripoli, informal settlements fiercely controlled by rifle-wielding criminal groups in Rio de Janeiro and more subtle forms of extortion and coercion in areas of Karachi, Nairobi and Medellín.⁶³ The availability of illicit economies and their instrumentalization by certain elites or armed groups into organized crime contributes to this fragmentation of the urban environment by creating regimes of urban governance sustained on predatory relations with local communities.

The power acquired by armed groups in these local authoritarian regimes, often through covert alliances with political actors in public agencies or legislative bodies, provides strong incentives for the continued marginalization of urban communities in ways that widen urban inequalities. Illicit economies offer armed groups and corrupt elite actors the ability to sustain localized control over important aspects of economic and political life. Many local armed groups in Nairobi, Kenya, emerged with the support of politicians and over the years developed deep roots into local public services that have allowed them to expand beyond the whims of their political patrons and into a thriving landscape of criminal activities based on taxation of public transport, waste removal and water provision.⁶⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, GI-TOC's research on five cities in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa showed how certain gang-controlled communities were almost completely detached from national governments' decisions regarding social distancing and instead followed the attitude communicated by local gang leaders, such as curfews enforced by public beatings in the case of San Salvador.⁶⁵

These enclaves of illicit economic regimes are not a historical anomaly, as states have never had a uniform presence and control throughout national territories. But the danger with urban regimes based on illicit economies is their location, next to the centres of power and wealth. These are often in cahoots with factions thereof, and at the heart of countries' manufacturing and service sector activities. The final report of the 'Cities and Fragile States' project undertaken at the London School of Economics in 2011 highlighted this damaging effect, suggesting that non-state armed groups and violence in major cities such as Karachi and Goma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo contribute to state erosion and fragility at a national scale.⁶⁶

Far from local problems, the fragmentation of political authority in cities poses a broader challenge for societies at country, region and global levels. This is because, as urban theorists have long argued, the ways in which cities develop go 'hand in hand with seismic shifts in political arrangements, economic relations and cultural forms, because cities 'are the embryos of socio-economic change'. This is particularly true in the urban century.

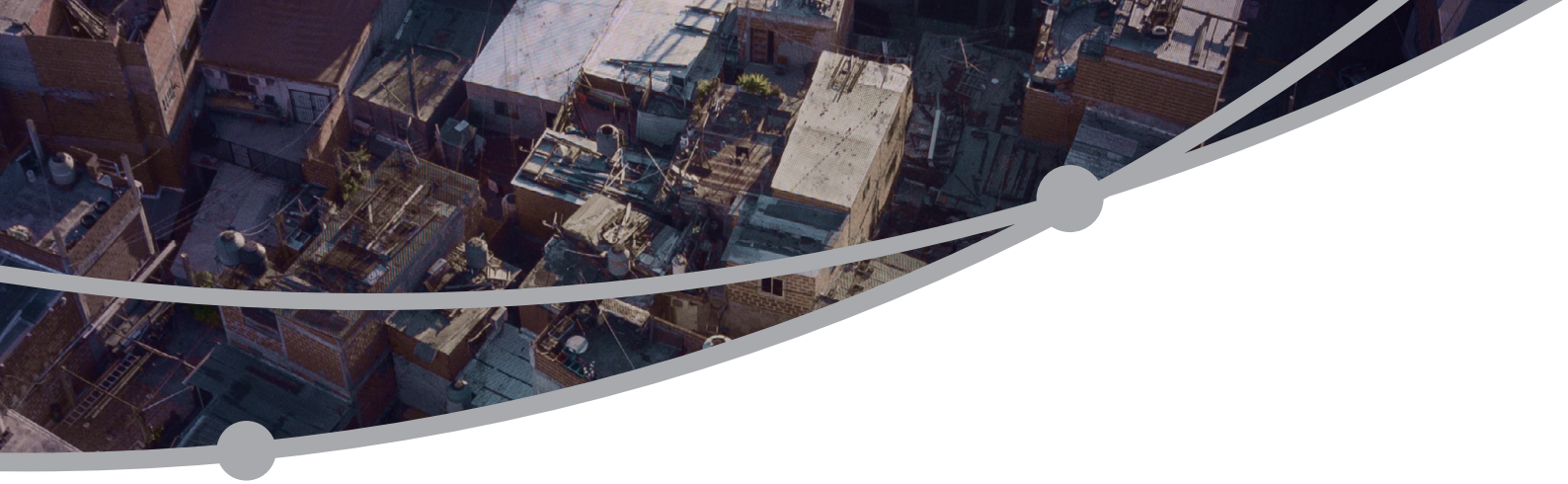
The causes of urban violence

Sociologists, anthropologists and writers from other social sciences have long debated the causes of urban violence and the ways in which the social and spatial organization of the urban environment shape group behaviours of (typically) young males towards violence. For instance, some of the first studies on gangs by the so-called Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s and 1930s focused on characteristics of certain urban areas that were seen as leading to higher criminality, such as heterogeneity, superficial social interactions and increased competition for resources.⁶⁷ Contemporary scholars find flaws in the Chicago School predictions about the universal 'disorganization' tendency of urban environments. Critics argue that despite immense urbanization pressures, many cities in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America have boomed, including migrant communities that were perceived in earlier research to be particularly vulnerable to the social challenges of urban living.⁶⁸ More contemporary views of 'ecological' explanations about why some spaces are more susceptible to violence argue that certain neighbourhoods concentrate residents that are disconnected from economic opportunities, mainstream institutions and dominant cultures, reducing social integration opportunities

and leading to aggressive competition for resources, such as space.⁶⁹

Despite more nuanced additions to the Chicago School, Dennis Rodgers argues that there is a lingering sense in popular culture and certain policy fields that violence is an inherent or natural by-product of chaotic urban environments. Rodgers says this obscures the deeper drivers of urban violence lying in the unequal distribution of power and resources in urban societies, together with how groups organize and vie for such things.⁷⁰ The latter perspective, focused on how urbanization alters the political-economic context of criminal markets and non-state groups, has garnered increasing policy attention in recent decades as policy and academic circles increasingly recognised the pressures of rapid urbanization.

It is not the purpose of this report to review the literature on urban violence or the social or psychological factors making certain groups more prone to violence. Instead, we focus on the shifts in the political economy of organized crime and other armed groups (such as militias, insurgents and state-linked actors) facilitated by rapid urbanization and its accompanying governance and environmental trends. ■



RESOURCE SCARCITY AND LAND CRIMES IN AN URBANIZING WORLD

Urban population growth exacerbates tensions related to access to essential and increasingly scarce resources such as water and land, and has been increasingly overlapping with climate change. Scarcity of essential resources, or the incapacity of states to deliver them, creates opportunities for criminal governance providers and incentives to join illicit economies, including for children in contexts of gang recruitment within extreme poverty. Land and housing in cities have become increasingly conflictual resources because of increased demand and price speculation amid growing populations, through rural-to-urban migration and displacement, for example. These patterns are highly likely to continue because of economic, conflict and climate change pressures.

Climate change and urban illicit economies

Cities are in the eye of the storm when it comes to climate change. Even if the latter is popularly pictured as a rural phenomenon, cities will face many of the impacts, such as population or economic implications. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change cites urbanization as one of its key risk factors for the attention of policymakers, as a process that intensifies the severity of heatwaves and increases the vulnerability of residents in coastal areas, rivers overflowing, as well as storms and other rainfall events that cause flooding.⁷¹ The urban population living in water-scarce regions globally is projected to jump by 121% from 933 million (32.5%) in 2016 to just over 2 billion in 2050 – with 840 million of those forecast to face it perennially.⁷² The land occupied by cities is projected to grow by 141% in low-income countries by 2070, potentially absorbing surrounding agricultural areas and threatening food security.⁷³

The problem of access to resources in cities is also largely related to political arrangements favouring elites, marginalization of informal settlements from state infrastructure and historical market injustices that have led to inequalities in service provision.⁷⁴ As Nazia Hussein has argued, scarcity is not only about places running out of vital resources such as water, but also about inequitable distribution of the resources that do exist, even if in insufficient volumes for growing urban populations.⁷⁵

This is sometimes exacerbated by climate change, such as in the case of migration induced by flooding and other climate events pushing low-income Bangladeshis from rural areas to cities, especially Dhaka,

Vastly expanding urban areas, such as Dhaka, shown here, will continue to intensify the damaging impacts of climate change. © Munir Uz Zaman/ AFP via Getty Images



where they become both victims and potential recruits for mafia groups illegally occupying land and conducting extortion. An international study on trafficking in persons in Bangladesh, produced in cooperation with the national government there, pointed to a 'quite clear' climate change-human trafficking nexus, with impoverished coastal residents migrating to urban centres 'away from environment-based livelihoods' increasingly at-risk from flooding of arable lands, storm surges and sea level rise.⁷⁶ Urban environments concentrate a wide range of economic activities in which victims of human trafficking are exploited, including factories, tanneries, domestic work and sexual exploitation in brothels.⁷⁷ Since its independence in 1971, two-thirds of urban population growth in Bangladesh is estimated to have stemmed from rural-to-urban migration.⁷⁸ The consequences, both for urban population size and illicit economies, have been particularly dire in the capital, Dhaka, which grew from a population of 3.5 million in 1981 to 21 million in 2020.⁷⁹

Although many rural migrants, displaced people and victims of trafficking expect to find better conditions in the city, they encounter other forms of insecurity. Land is constantly an unstable resource because poor rule of law paves the way for land encroachment and grabbing.⁸⁰ Over 4 million people in Dhaka are estimated to live in slums, where a particular and longstanding form of hybrid governance arrangement places its increasing population at the hands of slum criminal bosses known as *mastaans*.⁸¹ They are a widespread presence in the city's estimated 5 000 slums,⁸² where they conduct extortion, control the delivery of services and conduct political violence in collusion with certain politicians, who get vote banks in exchange for protecting their goons.⁸³ One of the biggest recruiting bases of *mastaans* are children, who collect extortion money, sell drugs, conduct contract killings and occupy land.⁸⁴ In an illustration of the ubiquity of land and real estate crimes that this report will later discuss, children are used to illegally occupy land until their owners, who are also threatened by the *mastaans*, are forced to relinquish it.⁸⁵ Children are also used by *mastaans* in jobs for politicians to disrupt political demonstrations or create chaos in waves of 'hartals' (political strikes), including burning buses and throwing bombs to paralyse public transport.⁸⁶

Women and girls in slums are another broad group that face particular vulnerabilities to criminal groups in areas where predatory criminal groups have stakes in service provision. In Nairobi's slums, water provision is widely controlled by informal tight-knit 'mafias' controlling who can sell the vital resource and often vandalise water connections established by charities.⁸⁷ The result is that prices in slums such as Mathare are often higher than in areas serviced by the Nairobi City Water and

Sewerage Company. In slums such as Mathare, women and girls are often responsible for collecting the water and therefore have more exposure to the mafias, their exorbitant prices and the negative health consequences because of the quality of the water supply and the weight of containers they have to transport from taps.⁸⁸ Abusive practices such as these are far from unique to Nairobi; women and girls typically deal with water mafias because they are responsible for water collection in seven out of 10 households lacking supply in the premises worldwide.⁸⁹

Land and real estate as key markets for organized crime

The demographic pressure of the urban century is helping to drive illicit economies linked specifically to features observed in rapidly growing cities. One such feature is the spatial politics involved in the access to land – a resource that is in increasing demand as cities grow, and consequently a resource that is also increasingly scarce, valuable and attractive to criminal interests. This is not a new phenomenon, with money laundering through the real estate sector being a particularly old and well-known tactic used by individuals trying to hide illicitly gained funds.⁹⁰ But it is also one that is becoming increasingly prevalent in areas of rapid urban population growth, especially sub-Saharan Africa.⁹¹

Developed countries – especially those with big financial centres such as London – are also vulnerable because the real estate market's status as 'the world's biggest store of wealth' has made it 'a key tool for money laundering and tax fraud'.⁹² Although transaction amounts are perhaps not as large in developing nations, the latter's rapid urban population growth happens amid insufficient or outdated regulatory systems. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, the urban planning profession is understaffed, urban land legislation is outdated and local government agencies struggle to cope with demand.⁹³

Urban expansion becomes an incentive for land grabbing, with surrounding rural and peri-urban areas – which are semi-dense transition zones between rural and urban areas – increasingly caught in the urban century's 'land rush', becoming vast 'city regions' and potentially threatening food security via occupation of agricultural land.⁹⁴ As in the case of resource scarcity more generally, the problem of urban land becoming drawn into criminalized markets is a result of growing demand for a scarce resource alongside failures by states and markets to accommodate growing populations in formally registered and serviced land.⁹⁵ The resulting urban sprawl formed by informal settlements with insecure land tenure and lack of formal property ownership leads, in turn, to a much greater vulnerability of land conflicts.⁹⁶

The role of unequal access to land in driving urban violence has received considerably less attention than that of drugs, for instance, despite having a huge potential for tipping into violence because of the emotional and psychological attachment to land and housing.⁹⁷ While low-income populations living in urban areas are increasingly vulnerable to evictions by armed groups or mafias to create space for profitable developments, the same illicit actors are usually the easiest means for incoming populations – such as rural migrants or displaced communities – to access land and housing in cities.⁹⁸ These new denizens of informal housing lack land tenure or access to formal courts and are consequently more vulnerable to the whims of landlords and mafia groups.

Urban land crime is conducted by a wide variety of actors, but it tends to thrive in contexts where armed actors have links to political elites, such as mafias, with connections in urban planning agencies, gangs with political patrons, militias linked to political actors and warlords or other powerful political players in conflict and post-conflict settings.



Land and real estate markets in Rio de Janeiro have been partly captured by criminal operations controlled by militia groups. © Mario Tama/Getty Images

Increased attention has been paid recently, for example, to criminal operations by militia groups in the land and real estate markets of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which is one particularly acute case of criminal exploitation of urban territory. The militias – armed groups with deep links in public institutions such as police forces and municipal agencies – have been behind a boom in unlicensed building activity that has included high rises and the formation of entirely new residential areas.⁹⁹ The militias' aggressive land grabbing underpinned the growth of their networks and territories in Rio, where reports of their irregular construction activity in Rio multiplied fivefold between 2016 and 2020. One study called it 'militia urbanism', involving a full package of urban services and regulation, including 'the illegal appropriation of public land and its allotment, mass construction of buildings, and real estate and financing operations through informal credit'.¹⁰⁰ Concern over this problem grew in April 2019, when two irregularly built blocks of flats in the neighbourhood of Muzema collapsed, killing 24 residents. Even after the disaster, militias retained their influence in the area, continuing illicit building activities and their control over the provision of services such as cooking gas and cable TV.¹⁰¹

Despite the fact that urban population growth rates are much slower in Europe, recent research has highlighted the Italian mafia's involvement in land grabbing and urban planning. Research by Francesco Chiodelli on the northern town of Desio indicated that corrupt elements within local politics and entrepreneurs applied pressure on local urban planners so they would take decisions on land use, allowing construction in areas previously assigned for agriculture and containing historical buildings.¹⁰² The attractiveness of this type of crime is evident: 'A simple line drawn on a planning chart can determine whether or not a lot is developable, exponentially affecting its value. [...] [T]he mere identification of those areas as buildable land increased their value by over 50 million euros.'¹⁰³ Amounts like this, linked to a single corruption mechanism in one town, display the attractiveness of land and real estate crime in a rapidly urbanizing world.

Within the global spread of urban land and real estate criminality, including in developed nations, it is in conflict-affected and post-conflict settings where populations are likely to be the most vulnerable. This is because of population displacement both from urban homes and from rural areas into crowded urban spaces, combined with weakened public institutions vulnerable to the influence of land mafias – many controlled by former or current warlords.

Despite less attention on housing, land and property as conflict financing tools, these ‘landscape-based’ assets are being increasingly used ‘to finance and support armed conflict.’¹⁰⁴ Armed groups have become acutely aware of the economic advantages of this revenue stream. The prominent jihadist writer Abu Musab al-Suri suggested a more local strategy for terrorist financing, arguing that armed groups’ use of foreign donations was a vulnerability, recommending that they occupy land with economic importance.¹⁰⁵ This idea became fully operationalized when the Islamic State occupied large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, but its early manifestation as the Islamic State in Iraq confiscated US\$90 million worth in real estate property in Ninewa province during August 2008 and January 2009, reselling at least part of it.¹⁰⁶ Confiscation of property became big business for the group. In 2015, it extracted an estimated US\$15 million from the rental of confiscated buildings annually in Mosul alone.¹⁰⁷ Information drawing from documents seized from the Islamic State in 2018 revealed investments even outside its territory, with one Iraqi expert estimating the group’s revenue from real estate investment in Baghdad at US\$4 million per month.¹⁰⁸

The Islamic State is far from alone in exploiting housing, land and property in conflict-affected states, though it differs from most other armed groups of recent decades, terrorist or otherwise, in having transitioned to a large area of territorial control with state-like aspirations. In other settings of armed conflict, a variety of actors profit from the seizure of housing, land and property through alliances – usually covert – with the state. During the war between the US-supported government in Afghanistan and the Taliban, former warlords acquired significant influence in land in Kabul. The stakes were high: land values in major Afghan urban areas increased by 1 000% between the US invasion in 2001 and 2012, due to speculation and grabbing in the political and economic centre of the country’s new order.¹⁰⁹

Their influence included political connections that would paralyse construction activity in certain areas unless extortion money was paid. In 2019, one local expert estimated the kickback charged for allowing building to go ahead to be US\$10 000 per floor, given the high value of land in the capital, in addition to taxing cargo trucks bringing in construction material.¹¹⁰ Construction of both buildings and public infrastructure (such as roads and bridges) required navigating a patchwork of local landlords, including former warlords, politicians and former mujahedeen, who needed economic incentives in addition to official taxes paid to the (weak) formal Afghan state.¹¹¹ In addition to influence over precious land in central Kabul, powerful individuals were also usurping empty plots in the city’s peripheries, using both violence and connection to political actors in the Parliament, in what one senior government official called a ‘land mafia’ in an interview with me.¹¹² It is not clear if these operations continued following the takeover of the central state by the Taliban. The negative effects of this land mafia were clear: they further undermined trust in the fragile government (both local and national), heightened tensions between ethnic communities and significantly increased the costs and complexity of developing urban infrastructure.

Perversely, the effect of land and real estate mafias tend to affect most heavily those seeking shelter from armed violence in the countryside and smaller urban areas. When I visited the Somali capital of Mogadishu in 2019 for research on political violence, the top concern of several interlocutors in government and civil society was conflict around urban land, including evictions and the use of militias

and – even more commonly – police forces themselves to resolve conflicting claims to land. At the time, approximately 20% of Mogadishu's estimated 2.5 million population are internally displaced people, with most of these 500 000 displaced people living without security of tenure or access to public institutions, such as the police or land registries.¹¹³ The lack of a central land registry, in particular, is a key reason why those claiming to own land resort to violence against other claimants or simply to dislodge groups of people.¹¹⁴

One senior local government advisor explained to me how interpersonal conflicts over land end up enveloping state security forces that are still heavily fragmented according to personal and clan allegiances:

You force people [out] by using an armed apparatus. Militias come sometimes because they are asked by landlords to evict [IDPs]. In 2017 there was a massive eviction, 40 000 displaced within 48 hours. [...] All kinds of violations happened but what drove the evictions were two private land owners who couldn't agree, one used the court system and one used force. When the evictions happened, he used the security apparatus. With this particular eviction the person who wanted the land back just called some men through the police and military and asked them to get people out. Wrong, immoral, unprofessional, you name it, but that's how these things are done. The two private landowners are [from the] same clan. It is not really about clans, it is about land rights. [...] In the context of Somalia, people at the security sector lack the proper training to know what is appropriate, they can be used to persecute private interests.¹¹⁵

The interests behind land conflicts are not necessarily criminal, and given the lack of a central land registry, it is difficult to disentangle claims of historical attachment from purely material interests in an area. But at least some land conflicts have involved the use of criminal tactics. Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus says that private land sales central to conflicts in Mogadishu over the years have included 'multiple claimants, paid witnesses, and the rise of an entire industry devoted to the generation of fraudulent claims designed to earn settlement money'.¹¹⁶

Another activity that lies in a dubious grey zone of legality is that of gatekeepers, referred to locally in Mogadishu as 'black cats', managing IDPs' informal settlements. They charge rent and get cuts from aid deliveries in exchange for a rough form of physical and tenure security for IDPs. Gatekeepers are in turn connected to more influential power brokers who laid claims to land and are now renting out accommodation to IDPs and other low-income populations. The influx due to the 2011 famine, for example, has been described as 'boom times for Mogadishu's gatekeepers and their associates'.¹¹⁷ Gatekeepers are often described as 'criminals' by both Somali authorities, though some in international aid organizations believe their system needs to be reformed rather than completely abolished.¹¹⁸ As it stands, however, displaced people more often than not find themselves in exploitative arrangements; one report in the international press describes how gatekeepers take half of all the food rations given to IDPs in one camp in Mogadishu.¹¹⁹

Aside from the corrosive effect that evictions and exploitative IDP arrangements have on the government's image, they also give rise to opportunities for al-Shabaab. The jihadist insurgent group maintains courts in territories around Mogadishu, which many of its residents resort to in hopes of quick and effective resolution to land disputes. Official state-sanctioned courts may take years to do the same or be corrupted by clan-based politics.¹²⁰

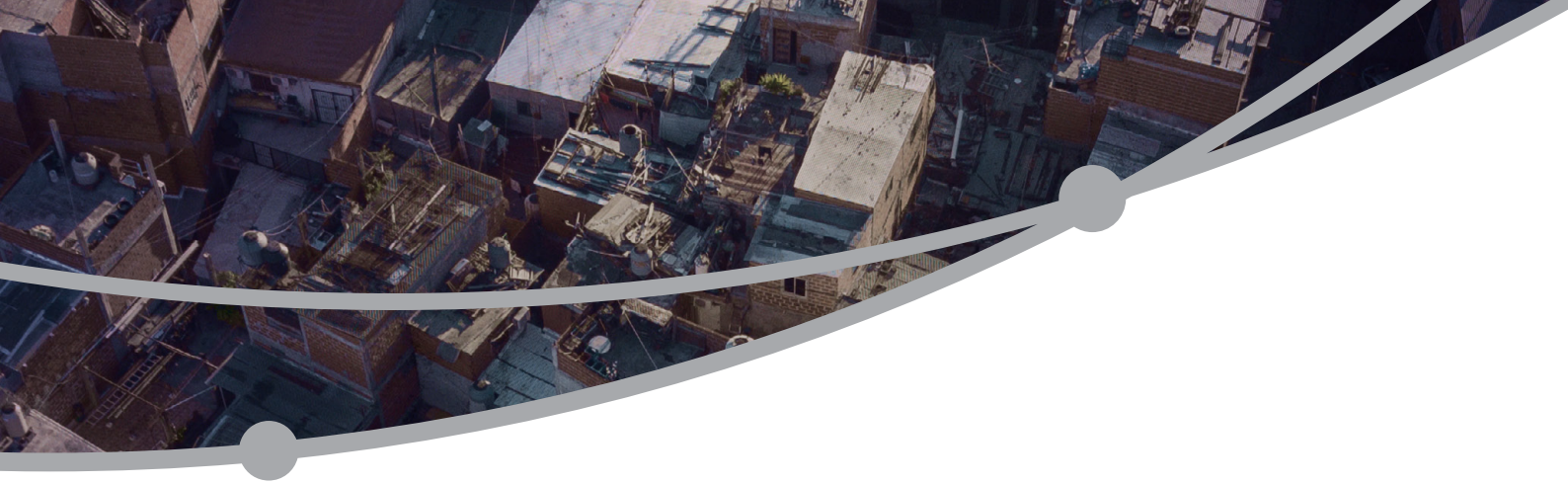
Violence and criminal interference in housing and urban land sectors have long-term implications for national development, due to cities' roles as engines of growth, innovation, investment and



The Tawakal IDP camp near Mogadishu. © Mohamed Abdiwahab/AFP via Getty Images

cohabitation between different communities. The damage explored in this section is particularly pernicious in conflict-affected and post-conflict countries due to the fact that urban planning and construction (or reconstruction) influence the shape of cities for the long term – potentially for centuries – and so spatial inequalities, poorly serviced communities and informal settlements in areas vulnerable to climate events, for instance, can become 'locked in' the built environment and costly to reverse. Additionally, the interest of organized criminal groups, elite-supported mafias and other armed groups in urban land and housing tends only to expand with the growing demands of urban population growth.

One important policy implication, as explored more thoroughly in the concluding section, is that international organizations, donor agencies and diplomatic corps need to dedicate specific attention to these types of crime, as their mechanisms and impact differ from other types of crime. For example, Jon Unruh points out that armed groups have expanded their exploitation of housing, land and property while international efforts against it have been nowhere near the level seen for other conflict-related resources, such as those targeting diamonds, oil, timber and tin.¹²¹ In the next section, this paper suggests potential international mechanisms to respond to this challenge.



ORGANIZED CRIME AND STABILITY IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED CITIES

The overlap between urbanization and institutional challenges reflects a broader challenge in the regional distribution of additional populations living in cities: these numbers will rise predominantly in sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa and Western Asia, and Oceania. Excluding Oceania, these regions are particularly affected by intense armed conflicts. These include recent hostilities in Gaza, which have caused substantial destruction in Gaza City, and a war concentrated in Sudan's cities, including in Khartoum, between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

Civil society organizations in Africa have issued warnings about the roles of cities as 'magnets' for armed groups exploiting transnational illicit economies linked to armed conflicts.¹²² An illustration is the city of Nampula, the third largest in Mozambique, located in its conflict-affected north.¹²³ Despite the region's poverty, the city's transportation infrastructure has made it an attractive hub for various transnational illicit flows, including environmental commodities and people, while local construction activities seem to be an avenue for money laundering. Precarious local institutions have also been infiltrated and corrupted by criminal interests.¹²⁴

Research in areas affected by armed conflict has shown that border towns, even if initially small, can serve as crucial hubs for transnational illicit flows and elite capture of wealth and extractive economies.¹²⁵ These economic roles can (and do) affect towns' attractiveness for armed groups and therefore the local communities' vulnerability to conflict. The Syrian town of Sarmada, located near the Turkish border, became a strategic site for armed groups because of their ability to tax trade through one of the country's few border crossings in operation. It saw Islamist radical group, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, become a gatekeeper for any merchant wanting to transport products into Syria.¹²⁶ Its economic importance and relative safety from bombardments led to a tenfold population growth in a matter of a few years after the start of the civil war in 2011, from 15 000 to 130 000 inhabitants.¹²⁷ While economic lifelines such as Sarmada can have important humanitarian functions for civilian populations, the entrenchment of illicit interests can develop longer-term challenges for rule of law and security if left unaddressed.

Armed conflict also leads to significant population displacement to cities, usually increasing the spread of informal settlements, where housing is more affordable but the vulnerability to predatory criminal actors is higher. About 60% of internally displaced people worldwide live in urban areas – equating to approximately 37.5 million people in 2022.¹²⁸ This drives up urban population growth in regions facing several simultaneous armed conflicts, such as West Africa.

The tendency towards rapid urban population growth in conflict-affected countries indicates that investment in urban reconstruction and stabilization is likely to take up significant (and growing) shares of post-conflict resources. It also means cities in such contexts are likely to have been affected recently by illicit economies linked to conflicts, such as extortion, drug trafficking and land seizures. For instance, the country with the least resilience factors against organized crime according to the GI-TOC's Organized Crime Index is Afghanistan, where the urban population is forecast to double between 2015 and 2035, surpassing 16 million, while the country is also the world's biggest producer of opium. Prior to the Taliban victory in 2021, urban residents faced growing urban criminality and corruption in police forces.¹²⁹ This has reportedly not improved despite the Taliban's draconic measures, which have proved insufficient to stop kidnappings, human trafficking and contract killings.¹³⁰

Other conflict-affected countries have also witnessed security forces struggling to tackle urban crime. Nigeria is experiencing one of the fastest rates of urban population growth on the planet, with the total urban population expected to increase by 113% between 2015 and 2035. Studies have highlighted vigilantism and criminal practices by groups such as the Bakassi Boys in Lagos.¹³¹ Illicit arms manufacturing also takes place in residential areas in the country's towns.¹³² Research conducted by the GI-TOC has shown that violent jihadist groups in the Lake Chad region, which also includes territories of Chad and Cameroon, have focused their looting on small towns and roads linking cities.¹³³

Nigeria illustrates the under capacity of security sector institutions to fulfil their basic functions in growing towns and cities. A recent GI-TOC study demonstrates that resource limitations have prevented the Nigerian state from providing well-trained police forces across its territory. Officers have taken up illicit revenue streams and set up checkpoints in cities and roads, which has harmed the institution's legitimacy in some regions.¹³⁴ This has led to a wave of self-defence vigilante groups, some supported by the state but acting largely autonomously, which have in turn also been involved in security rackets, low-level crime and even extrajudicial killings in some urban areas.¹³⁵

A view of Lagos. Nigeria is experiencing one of the fastest rates of urban population growth in the world. © Adeyinka Yusuf/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



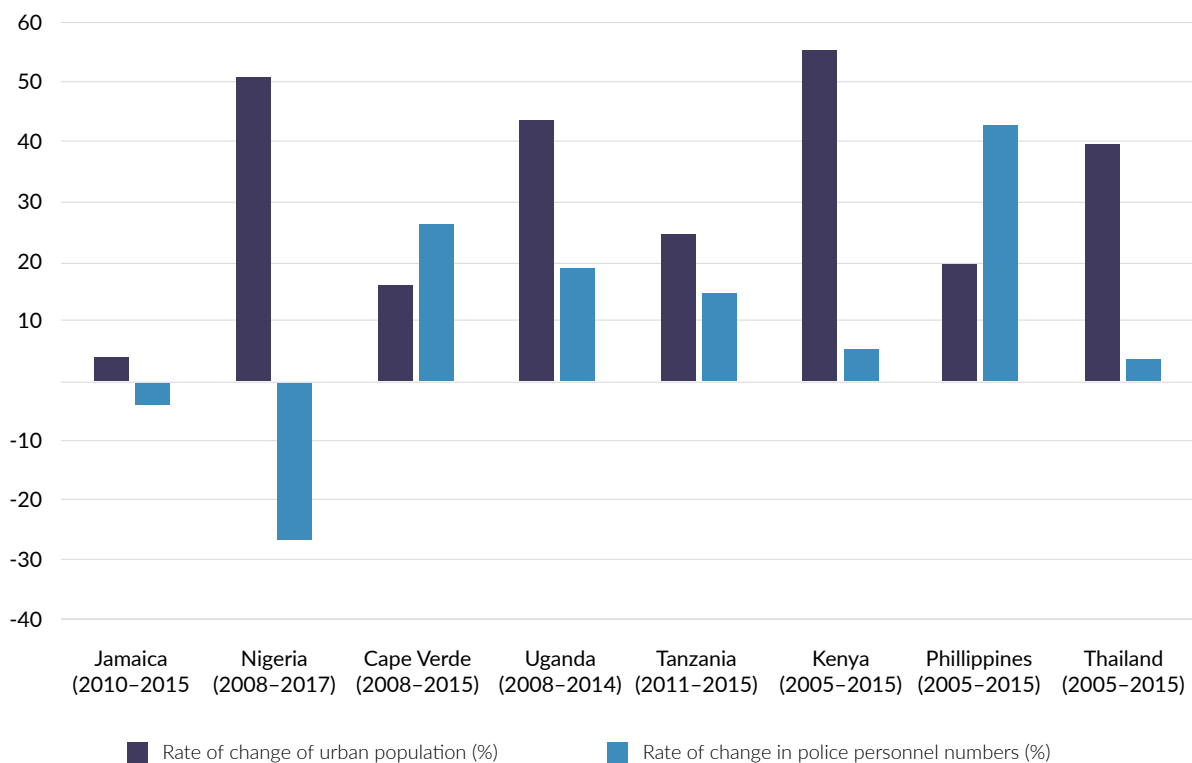


FIGURE 4 Urban population change versus police personnel change.

SOURCES: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018), World Urbanization Prospects: 2018 revision, custom data acquired via website: <https://population.un.org/wup/DataQuery/>; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Criminal Justice System: Police personnel, 2018, <https://dataunodc.un.org/data/crime/Police%20personnel>.

A rough quantitative indication of capability gaps in the field of public security can be seen in Figure 4, which compares the percentage change in urban population with the (patchy) data on police personnel in selected countries. Because the UN’s police personnel data is missing several countries and years, some key countries mentioned in this report are missing and regional numbers are not available. The figure shows countries located in rapidly urbanizing regions and for which data is available for relatively long spans of years. Due to these limitations in police personnel data, the ability to compare is limited and thus should be used as a rough illustration of how some countries face challenges in security provision. In particular, Nigeria, which faces one of the fastest rates of urban population growth in the world, saw a 26% fall in the number of police personnel between 2008 and 2017. In Kenya, another fast-growing urban population in Africa, urban growth has far outpaced police personnel. However, this is a rough illustration, given that police personnel does not necessarily indicate adequate policies, tactics or equipment to tackle challenges related to governance or illicit economies (such as the ones examined in this report). The lack of consistent and internationally comparable data on municipal security provision is another symptom of the insufficient focus on adapting security provision for the urban century.

The security deficit in new cities

One of the most acute challenges linked to urbanization in the Global South is also one of the most overlooked by policymakers: the emergence of thousands of new cities lacking institutional capacities to cope with governance challenges. The resulting inequality in the provision of policing, courts, water, energy, public transport and other basic services risks exacerbating socioeconomic rifts and empowering criminal providers, such as water mafias, illicit transport providers and others that charge extortionate prices, especially from the poor.

Between 1975 and 2015, the global number of cities doubled from 5 000 to 10 000, according to OECD estimates.¹³⁶ Again, this growth is highly unequal and more accelerated in low-income countries, where that number tripled in the same period. In high-income countries the number of cities increased by 50%.¹³⁷ This growth, and its unequal geographic distribution, will continue: UN-Habitat predicts the number of cities in low-income countries to increase by 76% between 2020 and 2070.¹³⁸

New cities are ‘born’ out of towns that grow past the threshold of 50 000 inhabitants and with a high-density of grid cells – at least 1 500 inhabitants per square kilometre – according to the ‘degrees of urbanization’ method followed by most international organizations. This is one of the three main sources of city population growth, alongside natural growth from births and migration from rural areas or towns.¹³⁹ In practice, this means that more cities are emerging globally without adequate planning for rule of law institutions such as policing, courts, prosecutor services, traffic control and community support mechanisms. More broadly, new cities also tend to lack their own fiscal resources to cope with demographic pressures through adequate infrastructure, service provision and institutional capacities (such as municipal administration, zoning regulations and planning).

There are many positive aspects to an increasing number of cities. Small urban areas and even towns with less than 50 000 inhabitants can offer many benefits for socioeconomic advancement in comparison to rural areas.¹⁴⁰ Still, the governance gaps are larger in smaller cities than in larger ones. In Africa, the share of households with access to electricity is 80% in cities with 1 million inhabitants or more and 58% in urban areas of between 10 000 and 50 000 inhabitants. Piped water supplies are scarce almost everywhere in the continent, ranging from 7% of households in rural areas and 25% in small urban areas to 33% in large cities.¹⁴¹ UN-Habitat highlights the additional challenges faced by intermediary or secondary cities – small or medium urban areas in comparison to their countries’ main cities. These secondary cities often struggle to attract investments, increase the employment base and meet demands for housing, infrastructure and services.¹⁴² This is partly because of a disproportional focus in policy discussions, particularly in international development circles, on megacities – those

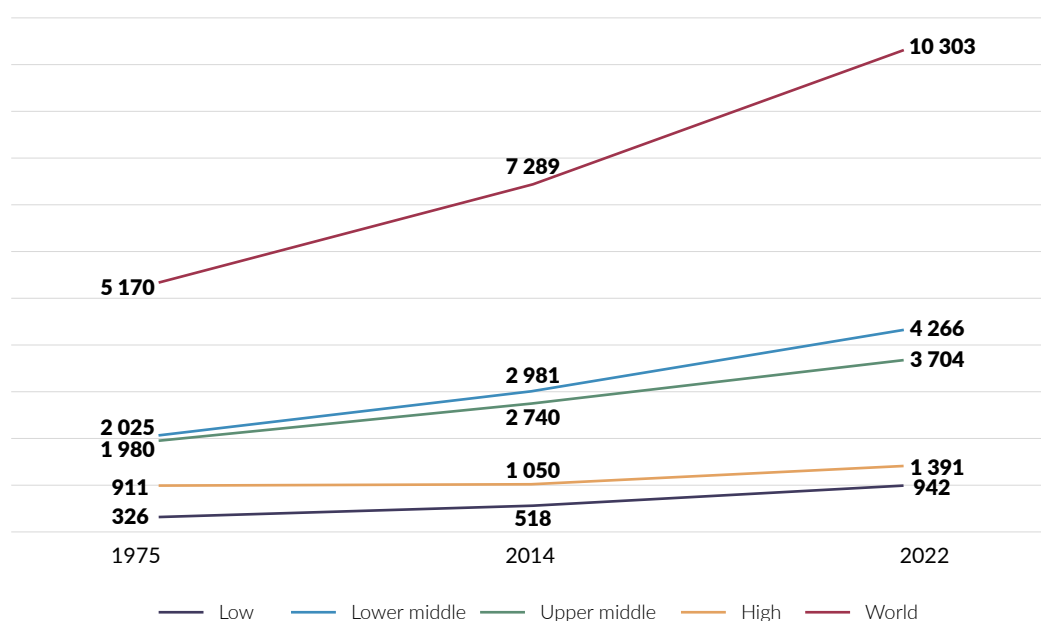


FIGURE 5 Number of cities by country income group, 1975–2015.

SOURCE: OECD and European Union Cities in the World, 2020, p. 21, based on Urban Centre Database GHS-UCDB R2019A (Florczyk et al., 2019).

with 10 million or more inhabitants. Their challenges in managing vast and sprawling agglomerations are indeed great, but gaps in resources and governance capacities are often larger in smaller urban areas which experience unplanned growth.

Furthermore, it is not only megacities that must respond to the pressures of sprawling suburbs. Cities of all sizes will also expand spatially as well as in population. In Africa, cities with less than 1 million inhabitants are expected to wield 75% of urban population growth, and currently host 63% of the continent's urban population.¹⁴³ The land covered by towns and semi-dense areas globally has doubled between 1975 and 2020.¹⁴⁴ In spatial growth, just like with overall population growth, rapid and unplanned land expansion (known as urban sprawl) has a negative socioeconomic impact. This may include damage to the environment through the destruction of surrounding green areas (often through unauthorized construction), increased energy consumption and reduced productivity because of infrastructure costs (such as for roads, electricity cables, water pipes). The same pressures exist for institutional 'infrastructure' such as the provision of courts, prosecution capacities, violence prevention mechanisms and policing.

Research highlights that secondary cities – medium-sized regional hubs – on or near international borders and ports are vulnerable to transnational flows in drugs, arms, contrabanded goods and smuggled people.¹⁴⁵ This is because of the 'connectivity' factor discussed earlier: ports, airports, roads and trains providing connections to regional and global markets make cities attractive hubs for both licit and illicit markets. Border towns and cities also tend to concentrate actors managing smuggling networks that make these places particularly attractive for quick money-making ventures.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, law enforcement in African border towns and cities are 'lacking the facilities, equipment, technologies and skilled workforce to fight crime',¹⁴⁷ with the added challenge of police officers themselves having frequent involvement in rent-seeking criminal activities (such as extortion). Secondary cities in the Sahel have been particularly affected by precarious provision of rule of law, possibly caused by pressures linked to the region's armed conflicts and radical Islamist groups.¹⁴⁸

Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa merits closer examination because of its rapid urban population growth amid existing vulnerabilities to illicit economies and armed conflict. The African Policy Circle, a grouping of civil society organizations across the continent, issued a stark warning in respect to the unpreparedness of expanding African cities to cope with security challenges:

In many parts of urban Africa, criminals have taken advantage of dense peripheries that local authorities struggle to reach. [...] Throughout much of the continent, weak state capacity has inadvertently aided and abetted the increase of crime in urban areas. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in Africa's small nations as well as its conflict zones and post-conflict environments. Examples include Kenya, where acts of terrorism have been more prevalent in major urban centres, or Guinea-Bissau, where authorities once seized 635 kilograms of cocaine worth an estimated [US]\$50 million, but let the traffickers escape with a much larger consignment of 2.5 tonnes because the police could not chase them.¹⁴⁹

An example illustrating how urban expansion heightens vulnerability to organized crime is the expansion of heroin markets in inland African cities. ENACT, a major EU-funded research programme on organized crime in Africa (which the GI-TOC is a part of), finds that urbanization amid weak governance provision has enabled criminal actors to infiltrate local administrations, corrupt local officials and 'take

control of urban infrastructure provision'.¹⁵⁰ Corruption and infiltration in service provision have paved the way for heroin market expansion among vulnerable urban populations affected by unemployment and other social issues.

Different forms of insecurity, armed violence and illicit economies have emerged for different reasons, and the relationship between urbanization and insecurity is not simple nor direct. The OECD estimates that one third of per capita GDP growth in the African continent between 2001 and 2020 has been caused by urban population expansion, despite the aforementioned decreasing relationship between urbanization and economic growth.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, some urban forms have had a greater vulnerability to predatory actors and economic interests that contribute to organized crime and illicit economies. Slums are frequent, though not exclusive, sites of predatory illicit economies both in competition with the state and in collaboration with it. The greatest victims are slum dwellers themselves.

Rapid urban population growth without the provision of public services such as effective security opens up opportunities for non-state armed groups and state-allied groups (such as militias at the service of politicians or parties) to carve out opportunities. Weak or repressive security forces tend to concentrate in low-income and informal urban settlements and strengthen communities' marginalization from formal institutions and economic opportunities. Such patterns of marginalization lead to a decline in state legitimacy and an even greater opportunity for non-state security providers able to enforce some form of order and conflict resolution, even if accompanied by extortion or protection rackets. Over time, this detachment from state-regulated forms of governance solidifies the fracturing of the urban space between alternative spheres of influence between state, gangs, militias and other armed groups.¹⁵²

African slums are particularly vulnerable to non-state armed groups operating in covert alliances with state actors in ways that may not seem as violent as the gang clashes seen in Latin American cities such as Rio de Janeiro, but which have harmful impacts to physical security and socioeconomic development to local communities. As Vivianne LeBas shows in the cases of Lagos and Nairobi, militias often emerge as a response to group insecurity in urban areas of poor (state) security provision.¹⁵³ The more organized militias become, the more useful they are for politicians as security providers in electoral campaigns and violence specialists in clashes with rival political groups (often along ethnic lines), especially in Kenya's post-election violence. In Lagos, militias have been used in recent decades 'to intimidate voters, organize poll fraud, and threaten rival candidates' alongside – as Nairobi demonstrates – clashes with rival political groups.¹⁵⁴ Over time, these groups have become more predatory as the 'primary perpetrators of violence in slum areas'.¹⁵⁵

These examples from Nigeria and Kenya also show the impact that precarious security provision and the influence of predatory armed groups have on democracy. Nigeria and Kenya are democracies, though plagued by clientelist relationships between politicians and predatory actors. Research on urban violence, particularly on the extreme forms of criminal violence observed in Latin America, has linked it to declining state legitimacy and support for democracy.¹⁵⁶ Illicit economies play a role in democratic erosion in cities by sustaining predatory models of resource accumulation between armed groups and local communities. This is particularly clear in informal settlements such as Mathare, in Nairobi, where armed groupings of young men have frequently transitioned between roles as criminal gangs and political militias depending on the country's political calendar.¹⁵⁷ As gangs that started with petty robberies or groups that started as vigilantes grow, they are increasingly drawn to more profitable activities such as providing gas, water and security – and the taxes associated with them. This service provision also makes territorial control or at least influence indispensable, as allowing rivals or even

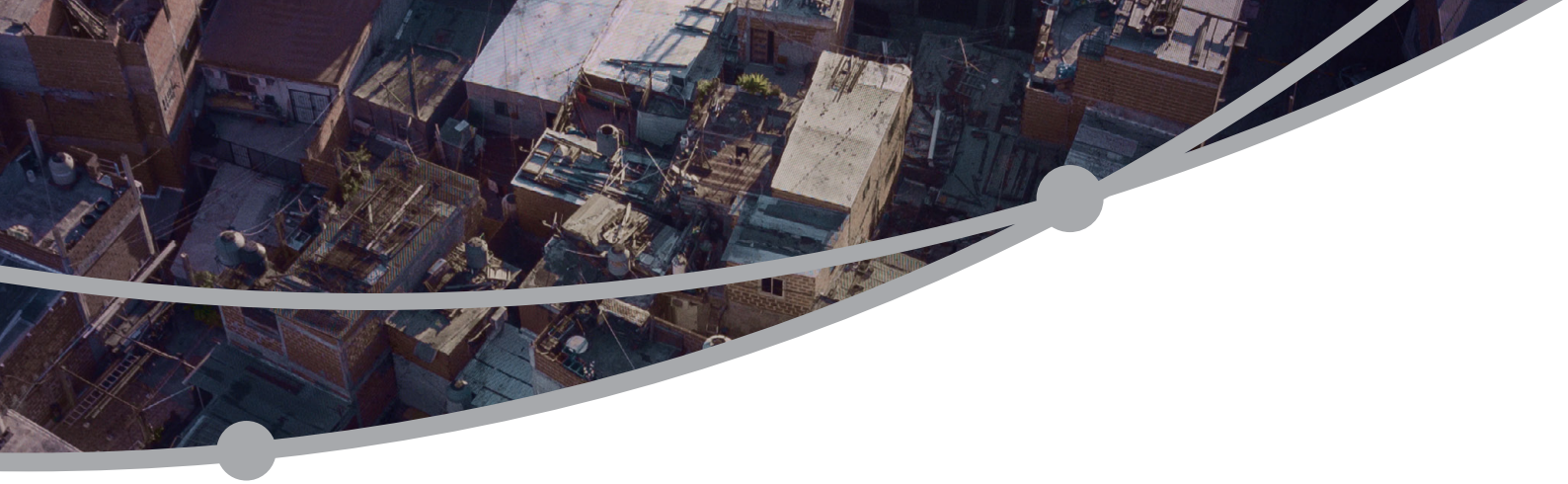
licensed private providers to encroach would mean losing revenues. Territorial presence and violence specialism, in turn, have often made the gangs attractive for politicians, as one Nairobi resident told me:

If before they snatched your handbag, now they want to intimidate you, to have some influence over the area they occupy. At that point they become attractive to political actors because politicians see they can use organized violence to scare their opponents, get votes and fight opponents' [supporters]. At this point the gang morphs into a bigger group. Now you have this big group that morphs into criminality, economics [and] political and vigilante roles.¹⁵⁸

The consequences of these converging sources of political and economic exploitation in slums for Africa's development is not difficult to see: half of urban inhabitants in sub-Saharan Africa – 230 million people – currently live in slums.¹⁵⁹ Slums and other urban areas of heightened socioeconomic marginalization are particularly vulnerable to security provision flaws and predatory criminal actors. Fortunately, they are also places of remarkable innovation and informal ways of making a living and politically organizing society (through community leaders and associations, for instance). These sources of resilience can be empowered through policies and investment, especially if security provision is combined with positive governance and development programmes.

The current picture, however, is one of insufficient policy attention and resources being paid to the government of Africa's monumental demographic transition. A study of 16 African cities by Cities Alliance, an international NGO, has shown that local governments have at most 1.4 management and technical staff per 1 000 inhabitants, much less than the 30 per 1 000 inhabitants in developed countries.¹⁶⁰ A process of administrative decentralization has accelerated since the signing of an international agreement by African Union member states in 2014, but the transfer of competencies to subnational governments has not been accompanied by a corresponding transfer of resources, which are often unpredictable and subject to the whims of political relationships between local and central government.¹⁶¹ Clientelist behaviours also undermine effective urban governance. Political parties are often focused on providing short-term benefits to constituents rather than structural improvements to public services.¹⁶²

These flaws in subnational governance place African urban areas in a difficult position to provide rule of law and effective institutions in areas affected by organized crime. This section examined more closely the challenges for Africa, given the continent's impressive demographic shift this century, but similar ones are present in other regions. Latin America has faced intense urban violence in recent decades, partly due to an earlier (and poorly managed) urbanization process.



CONCLUSION

Urbanization brings huge economic and social development opportunities and has historically been associated with economic development, although this seems to be weakening. Other megatrends, such as globalization and emerging digital technologies, have been leveraged by organized crime groups worldwide as catalysts or tools, and so too is urbanization. It offers potential opportunities for the growth of illicit economies and predatory actors operating around them.

This report has examined how rapid urbanization expands illicit economic opportunities for organized crime and heightens risks to peace, security provision and human rights for governments and civil society. The data from the GI-TOC's Organized Crime Index has allowed for a unique comparison between levels of resilience against organized crime and urban population trends. We found that there is a clear negative correlation between resilience and urban population growth, whereby – globally – higher annual rates of urban population growth tend to be associated with lower resilience scores. This further illustrates the growing vulnerability of societies and pressures facing governments in countries facing these joint challenges. The correlation is particularly strong in fragile and conflict-affected countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Nigeria.

There are three broad areas in which these incentives and pressures operate:

- **Human rights risks amid urbanization:** Cities' transportation infrastructure and global trade flows make them attractive for criminal groups. Armed groups such as gangs, militias and vigilantes often impose rules and offer services accompanied by predatory illicit economies. This is not new, but state responses remain inadequate and overly reliant on short-term repressive policing methods that fail to tackle broader issues linked to governance and the fractured social contract in cities. This poses a large-scale threat to human rights, as criminal organizations impose on communities intimidatory rules, restrictions on movements, extortionate security 'taxes' and armed violence, including persecution of human rights defenders and journalists. State actors, on the other hand, reinforce some of these vulnerabilities through repressive policing tactics and corrupt alliances between politicians and criminal actors.
- **Resource scarcity and land grabbing in cities:** Climate change tends to exacerbate many of the demographic and governance pressures mentioned in this report. Urbanization itself contributes to the drivers of climate change by, for example, absorbing green belts and agricultural areas in the name of urban construction – often by mafia groups or through corrupt mechanisms. Climate events disrupting rural livelihoods have already placed populations at risk of human trafficking to cities and exploitation by criminal actors in slums. Municipal infrastructure often struggles to

provide vital resources such as water to sprawling urban peripheries and informal settlements, creating opportunities for mafia-style providers. Access to urban land, in particular, has become an enormously conflictive issue giving rise to thriving criminal markets in regions as varied as Italy and Somalia. Urban sprawl with insecure land tenure and lack of formal property ownership acts as an incentive for land grabbing for reselling or renting under exploitative arrangements for vulnerable populations – a common feature in conflict-affected settings such as Somalia and Afghanistan. Illicit construction activity and real estate crime take place even in developed countries such as Italy, and pose a particular risk to states' institutional integrity because of corruption in municipal agencies and law enforcement.

- **Urbanization, new cities and insufficient security provision:** With rapid urbanization concentrated particularly in low-income, fragile and conflict-affected settings, an increasingly large number of cities (and citizens) face global criminal organizations, flows and armed actors without a corresponding increase in security provision (investment and training). Although internationally comparable data on local law enforcement is not available, evidence from academic and policy studies frequently point to organized criminal actors exploiting governance gaps in cities, such as predatory illicit economies taking root in 'dense peripheries that local authorities struggle to reach'.¹⁶³ Small and medium urban centres tend to be particularly vulnerable given fewer resources and greater infrastructure deficits, and the challenge has been on the increase: UN-Habitat forecasts the number of cities in low-income countries to increase by 76% between 2020 and 2070.

The report demonstrates the vulnerability of existing cities because of their unmanaged expansion, as well as the risks of new cities being exposed to the challenges of illicit economies and organized crime without the institutional frameworks to respond. As we have seen, governments in conflict-affected countries have been unable or unwilling to tackle criminal markets in towns or provide security against armed groups' predation on civilian economies. It is important for the policy and academic communities to join forces to better understand the complex interlinkages between urbanization and violence, and some research has already provided important insights. For example, an analysis of 85 countries has shown that violence targeted at government actors is associated with populational increase in a country's largest cities, whereas violence targeting civilians is associated with growth in secondary cities.¹⁶⁴ More policy-oriented research can unveil not only challenges but new and innovative policy interventions to make cities safer and supportive of domestic and international development.

Countries in Latin America have relied on militarized police or gendarmerie-style forces deployed by leftist, centrist and right-wing governments alike.¹⁶⁵ El Salvador has been under a state of emergency declared with the aim of combating gangs, with reports of enforced disappearances; arbitrary mass arrests; and deaths in custody.¹⁶⁶ In countries as varied as Brazil, Italy and Somalia, land mafias have operated in collusion with public agents in a growing challenge for the governance of urban expansion. Meanwhile, climate disruption both in rural areas and cities risks increasing the number of rural-to-urban migrants vulnerable to traffickers, violent gangs and mafia-style service providers.

The challenges are clear, and the evidence collected so far on the performance of governments in urban security is not encouraging, though good practices do exist. The broader picture, though, is one of policymakers increasingly overwhelmed by the pace of both urban population growth and the rise of new cities in some of the world's most fragile settings. Latin American countries, having experienced an early urbanization process (particularly fast in the second half of the 20th century) when compared to other developing regions, have often relied on repressive policing and a short-term focus on the use of force against criminal groups. This is despite some successful initiatives in specific countries, some of which are driven by granular data on crimes such as Colombia's Plan Nacional de

Vigilancia Comunitaria por Cuadrantes (community policing by quadrant) and the combination of targeted social prevention and community policing in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.¹⁶⁷

Research from Latin America has also shown a wide range of potential preventative and responsive measures against urban violence, ranging from hot spot policing (focusing police resources in the relatively small areas where crimes are at their highest) to urban renewal and interventions on at-risk people through cognitive behavioural therapy.¹⁶⁸ Between the late 1990s and 2016, there were an estimated 1 300 specific interventions to improve urban security in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁶⁹ Despite this wealth of evidence, the effectiveness of many interventions is still poorly understood due to insufficient data and systematic evaluation. More worrisome, however, is the fact that both government and public opinion continue to support punitive and repressive approaches, such as in the aforementioned case of El Salvador.¹⁷⁰

Policymakers and the multilateral system working on peacebuilding, international security and human rights clearly have significant challenges in better implementing, coordinating and scaling up successful interventions, but best practices do exist. The examples above are not formulas, though. And the concentration of studies and examples from Latin America reflects a reduced level of data and, sadly, a scarcity of holistic approaches to tackle urban violence in some rapidly urbanizing regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia.

Most data on successful interventions from Latin America often focus on preventing or reducing violence, which is not the same thing as countering the political economy and structures of organized crime. Whereas specific targeted interventions such as community or hotspot policing or renewal of crime-ridden urban areas can have immense local success, criminal organizations can relocate or temporarily reduce their violence. The lingering effects of organized crime and the illicit economies supporting them can remain a corrosive force on public institutions, human security and trust in democracies – in Latin America and elsewhere. For these reasons, it is crucial that national governments, international organizations, donor agencies, NGOs and the expert community intensify their efforts in discussing security provision amid rapid urbanization. This would establish a reconceptualization of security away from short-term police repression and towards a comprehensive exercise of governance provision. In other words, this would enable the provision of safety, public services and infrastructure to rebuild tarnished social contracts in crime-affected cities.

Policy recommendations

Urban security policies are dependent on local contexts, but national and multilateral actors have a role to play in adapting broader strategies for peacebuilding, security and human rights for our current global context of urbanization.

Policymakers at the national level need to break the siloes dividing urban development work and security provision. Urban security interventions have struggled to scale up to more cities or to be transferred to other countries, partly because of a lack of political will to embrace institutional changes and high costs. Urban development interventions, on the other hand, have focused on important areas such as sanitation, transportation and other types of infrastructure with little to no integration of public safety or measures to deter criminal takeover. These siloed approaches are not ambitious enough if we aim to produce meaningful change at a large (regional or global) scale.

Public policy and international cooperation should focus on adapting multilateral practices for peace, security provision and human rights for contexts of rapid urbanization. This could include mapping urban governance actors, criminal patterns and illicit markets affecting interventions in cities. Additionally, better local-national coordination should focus on the development of urban security strategies that galvanize multisectoral action and political will. Specific recommendations include:

- **Introducing urban peacebuilding and security as core items in the multilateral agenda:** The multilateral system's core tools for peace and security are affected by urbanization dynamics. Urbanization means that building peace, security provision, promoting human rights and reconstructing after conflict will increasingly mean working in and with urban areas. The 'United Nations toolbox' for peace and security, as outlined in the UN's draft Pact for the Future document, mentions conflict prevention, peacebuilding and peace operations, areas that this report highlights as affected by the expansion of illicit economies amid rapid urbanization. Strategies and planning for such areas should engage more frequently and more profoundly on urban issues, underlining how dynamics of urban governance, inequalities, land, service provision, community vulnerabilities, local illicit markets and city-based armed groups affect interventions and how to counter them. This can be achieved, for instance, by UN-Habitat and the UNOCD working in partnership more frequently to advise key multilateral strategies (such as the Pact for the Future) and frameworks.
- **Improving and closing gaps in our knowledge of crime and security mechanisms in areas of rapid urbanization:** Scholars and international organizations such as the World Bank and the OECD have significantly expanded the evidence base and conceptual understanding of urban security and violence issues. But our knowledge of challenges and policy frameworks remain insufficient. A wealth of studies have been produced on and in Latin America, but comparatively less in Africa and Asia, which are currently facing the fastest rates of urban population growth. Data on crucial security sector variables such as number of police officers is lacking even at national level, let alone at local and provincial levels. Standardizing statistics, improving the granularity of public security data at the local level and increasing analytical work on urban organized crime and security provision in rapidly urbanizing regions should be a priority for the international community. This could be achieved by UNODC partnering with national and local governments in fragile settings, and by increased expert studies on security gaps in areas of rapid urbanization.
- **Building national urban security strategies to revamp outdated thinking on security and improve coordination:** Local-national coordination can and should have a central role in improving urban security. This can be achieved by the development of national urban security strategies to set out principles, develop and implement policies, improve resources and address staffing issues in local security forces (or regional forces in federative country structures). This idea takes inspiration from national urban policies, which have been championed by the OECD and UN-Habitat to 'increase the capacity (human, financial, and institutional) of policy makers at national and subnational levels to develop and progressively implement urban policies'.¹⁷¹

The national urban security strategy can begin with developing a document to set out the framework of security provision in a holistic manner, including how the roles of policing and the criminal justice system link to other public administration sectors such as infrastructure, education, health, urban planning and economic policies. Community policing can be combined with an urban renewal strategy, for example, involving infrastructure improvement alongside conditional cash transfers for social development (dependent on continued school enrolment for example). At the same time, it is important for national governments not to be overly prescriptive on solutions that might vary according to each local context. Certain policies go beyond the remit of local or even regional

governments, such as large-scale social development policies that would require investment from central governments and the involvement of investigative federal police units. National strategies should leave a margin for local innovation while also providing coordination, resources and evaluation to ensure broad best practices are being followed. Importantly, national urban security strategies should aim to close gaps in resources, personnel and quality of law enforcement, prisons and other public institutions relevant for their goals across cities of all sizes. The strategy can also set out how cooperation and exchange of intelligence between different layers of security forces will take place, ensuring public authorities can effectively follow and prosecute criminal markets and groups with a broad geographic remit.

- **National urban security strategies can also be a good entry point to plan and discuss ‘smart city’ solutions with local governments and civil society:** Smart city solutions have acquired different meanings as technologies and public opinion on technological solutions have changed. But one definition from a prominent organization working on the subject says ‘smart cities put data and digital technology to work with the goal of improving the quality of life’, giving public agencies real time data to ‘watch events as they unfold’.¹⁷² In the field of security, it includes solutions that have a strong component of surveillance and data collection through technological solutions, including those using artificial intelligence, giving rise to concerns over personal liberties and data security. Public security systems offered under ‘smart cities’ packages have included predictive policing, which usually involves statistical analysis with predictive components to anticipate where crime incidents will occur and helping to direct police resources. Such measures have important roles to play and there is evidence that they have led to significant security improvements in some contexts.¹⁷³ What remains to be seen – and preferably discussed with civil society and disadvantaged communities – is the impact of smart city measures in tackling the more deep-rooted drivers of organized crime and illicit economies.

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