POLICY COMMENTARY

# Threading the Needle of Violence: Pursuing Overlapping Dynamics to Support Urban Peace

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In 2015, 193 United Nations member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Goals (SDGs). The Agenda, although imperfect, opens important space to discuss, analyze and invest in the ways in which different aspects of social, political and economic life influence one another. The Agenda takes specific challenges—organized crime, climate change, gender inequality, etc.—and provides an integrated framework that is both universal (applicable to all countries) and inclusive (applicable to all people). Those working on organized crime would do well to better use the power of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs to advance balanced approaches that can both reduce violence associated with crime in the near term and the dynamics enabling organized criminal behavior in the long term.

## Development: A Simplistic History

Never before has the frame of reference for what is meant by 'development' been as inclusive and universal as the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 provide. For too long development was considered a linear process: grow an economy and other positive aspects will fall into place. Development was considered an end state that one set of countries had already achieved, with other countries marching in line towards the same end state. While this simplistic construct was not always made explicit, it implicitly influenced assistance modalities, partnerships and overarching development norms. What this framing left out was a range of priorities that make people and societies healthy, including, primarily, the ability to live free from fear and violence.

While the process of development is primarily endogenous—influenced by a country's history, governing systems, regional and geographic characteristics—it is also highly influenced by global norms and relationships. Because of this, discussions that influence the normative understanding of what it means to be a healthy, developed country are important. While such discussions and the benchmarks they generate don't change practices overnight, they do influence priorities over time.

It is for these reasons that the inclusion of Goals 11 and 16 into the Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015 are exceptionally important. While the systems of international relations are based upon interactions between national governments, the world has changed and cities are crucial to advancing healthy, pro-social societies. Over half the world's population currently lives in cities, a number projected to increase to nearly 70% by 2050 (UN DESA 2018). Meanwhile, mega-cities, with populations over 10 million inhabitants, are on the rise, with the governing entities of those cities serving populations larger than the countries of Denmark, Liberia and Costa Rica. Exchanging knowledge and positive practices and laying down markers of accountability at the city level becomes, therefore, of increasing importance.

Goal 11—'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'—reflects an international consensus that future development priorities must track demographic trends, including in how we think about issues of governance, safety and overall wellbeing. Investing in the knowledge around city-level responsibility to increase safety and security is one essential piece to this broad shift in priorities.

While the Millennium Declaration called for a world where people can live free from fear, the Millennium Development Goals, which preceded the SDGs, did not contain any specific goal or target aimed at

achievement of and maintenance in peaceful societies. Steadily throughout the early 2000s, the narrative that there is no development without peace and no peace without development began to take hold. In part this emerged from a realization that economic development would not automatically result in peace. The 2018 Pathways for Peace Report drove this point home:

> This surge in violence afflicts both low- and middle-income countries with relatively strong institutions and calls into question the long-standing assumption that peace will accompany income growth and the expectation of steady social, economic, and political advancement that defined the end of the twentieth century (UN and World Bank 2018).

To build peace we must, as Eleanor Roosevelt put it all those years ago, work towards peace. The inclusion of Goal 16—'Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'—crystalizes the evolution of this discussion and is, therefore, exceptionally important as marked progress in the evolution of development.

As described in the chapeau of the SDGs, Agenda 2030 is meant to be taken as both an integrated document and a universal one. Taken together, Goals 11 and 16 set an imperative to support safe cities by, in part, investing in peaceful communities with reduced incidents of violence, place limits on organized crime, and increase access to effective justice mechanisms and fair, effective institutions.

## Organized Crime and Violence: A Simplistic Analysis

Influencing narratives is far from sufficient. The real work comes in leveraging these narrative changes to invest in proven practice that makes a difference. A major obstacle in the way of advancing peace in urban landscapes in particular is a continued lack of understanding of the dynamics of urban violence and, in particular, the influence of organized crime in posing an impediment to peace. There remains a stubborn refusal to look organized crime in the face or, when it is considered, a stubborn insistence on investing in repressive law enforcement measures rather than fully understanding the complexity of its make-up or interdependencies with other local dynamics.

Organized crime is responsible for as much lethal violence as conflict since the start of the 21st century (UNODC 2019). 'Today's most violent situations are linked to gang warfare, organized or drug-related crime, state brutality, murders by non-state actors, and heightened levels of interpersonal violence' (World Bank 2019). Many of today's wars are rooted in expressions of economic gain through looting, kidnapping, extortion and other criminalized activities. A vast proportion of all of the above is playing out in cities, from Rio to Idlib, from Cape Town to Kabul. Sub-national governments, either in their complicity with criminal actors or in how they respond to real or perceived threats, are hugely important and hugely neglected as the system defaults to national governments. This paper outlines how existing conceptualizations of organized crime fail to sufficiently capture dynamic realities and suggests an updating of our diagnostic capacities to better meet the challenges ahead.

Definitional clarity is good. It helps us to agree to terms, discuss overlapping phenomenon and develop analytics. All too often, however, our definitions are shaped by narratives rooted in historical precedent that privileges certain segments of society over others. In the United States, for example, elite governing systems have found ways to criminalize blackness, from Jim Crow laws to modern day inequalities in the criminal justice system (Alexander 2010). In parts of Rio de Janeiro, historically marginalized and ostracized population areas taken advantage of by criminally motivated actors pose a dual burden for state-led responses: how to convince a long-ignored population that the government is finally there to help (Sampaio 2019).

As James Cockayne has articulated so well, our narratives inform our responses. 'The label "organized crime" is itself part of the problem. Like the term "terrorism," by labelling the conduct in question as inherently illegitimate, it tends to create a knee-jerk preference for coercive response and to push states towards a-strategic responses' (Cockayne 2016). Such 'a-strategic' responses undermine investments in accurate diagnostics, relying instead on overly-simplified and often biased aggregations. Rather than focusing on the systems that enable high levels of violence to persist, such non-strategic, repressive measures all too often focus on targeting specific individuals, doing little to change trajectories for peace in the long term.

The erasure of historic inequalities is even more commonplace in times of exceptionally high violence. In such times, politicians and the people who support them very often demand fast action to bring violence levels down. This fast action typically relies upon a limited toolbox of response options, namely, those from the criminal justice system—policing, incarceration and, in some instances, state-sanctioned killings. These punitively oriented actions all too often overly rely upon the narratives of exclusion and privilege that

criminalize certain segments of society while reinforcing inequitable power structures. Law enforcement tools are most effective when seen as legitimate by society. Overly simplistic and exclusion-oriented law enforcement tactics will reinforce a sense of illegitimacy, making the essential job of fair and just policing extremely challenging if not impossible.

Part of what enables such responses to persist is popular support. In El Salvador, public opinion polling demonstrates high levels of support for repressive responses to confront gang violence. But whereas the state has expressly denounced MS-13 and labeled them as a terrorist organization, evidence has emerged documenting collaboration between high-ranking state officials and MS-13 leadership (Insight Crime 2017). Further, El Salvador has among the highest femicide rates in the world, some linked to gang activity and some not. Reinforcing narratives of violence in El Salvador as dominated only by gang violence reinforces popular support for repressive tactics and reduces attention to endemic abuse suffered by women and girls. The major gangs of El Salvador are exceptionally violent, but a narrative that explains violence only in terms of criminal activity neglects the relationships and corrupted systems that undermine broader public safety.

Highly repressive approaches also tend to result in large numbers of incarcerated populations. Large scale incarceration not only raises human rights concerns, but also can create externalities that undermine public safety in the longer term. Just as we have seen people radicalized in prisons, so have we seen organizational learning and merging in prison environments. As Sampaio (2019) has pointed out,

> Thus, the political prisoners would pass on to common criminals imprisoned with them their knowledge on how to organize an armed movement and the idea of joint action to resist police abuse… Ironically, the military police were in charge of security in the prison and witnessed first-hand the genesis of what would evolve into its nemesis, the Red Command.

In this context the repressive measures fed into incarceration, which fed into merging of different groups and skill sets within prison, thereby strengthening anti-state violent group cohesion. Rather than reinforcing safety, policies of mass incarceration, long prison sentences and exceptionally crowded prison conditions have in many instances undermined public security (Vilalta 2019).

In contexts where the state may be controlling or benefitting from criminal activity, violence can be used as a tool of politics and, in some contexts, a tool of geo-politics. The state has considerable capacity to shape violence by deploying and retracting security assets to fulfill strategic political aims. At a time when state-sponsored use of violence against populations is on the increase globally, paying particular attention to how and in what circumstances such use of force reacts to or is done in collusion with criminal enterprises requires much greater analytic investment (Kleinfeld and Muggah 2019).

> When state absence is combined with state violence and brutality, and when instead of offering protection, the state is deliberately targeting specific communities through violent means, people will turn to violent groups as saviors, problems solvers, and that's when you really see the problem escalating and communities getting attached to violent groups.
>
> —Rachel Kleinfeld, 2020

What Cockayne and others, including this author, argue for is advancing our empirical knowledge, including primary analysis of highly dynamic power relations. Without the right level of analysis, responses risk being informed by the wrong diagnosis, resulting in ineffective or, worse, counter-productive interventions. The SDGs provide a nesting mechanism for this analysis, which in most cases will bear relevance on institutions of power, with language that supports inclusivity, people-centered justice and peaceful societies.

## Cities: The Promise and Potential

To get this empirical knowledge right it is crucial to engage the creativity, leadership and democratic potential of cities. Cities often serve as incubators of policy ideas. Given the relative closeness of the population to the governing bodies, cities are able to experiment with strategies informed by demands from their residents in a way that is harder at national levels. Cities are also able to collect detailed data and to understand that data based upon individualized analysis rather than through aggregated categorical qualifiers.

City officials also have imperatives to deliver safety outcomes for constituents, providing an incentive for action. When appropriately informed by a good cross-section of society, such action can more easily orient

around a holistic model of violence prevention and public safety than what a more removed national strategy may have to offer. Of course, not all constituents hold the same levels of power and safety outcomes may be biased towards the elite. But, in theory, city leaders can be more easily influenced by local residents than often happens nationally.

This is important because consistent evidence demonstrates that balanced interventions that build relationships and engage sophisticated communications help lower violence. This is particularly true when concentrated at the small number of individuals typically responsible for driving the majority of violence. Listening to the voices of a broad spectrum of society is also important as demonstrating fairness and performing in ways viewed as legitimate enables more effective state–society relationships, with police specifically, but also extending to other parts of the public sector. City-level analysis and leadership can also help to guide the right kind of strategic and tactical partnerships that leverage the right capacities, including jurisdictional authority appropriate to the intervention requirements. Again, the SDGs provide this frame of reference.

Further, cities have demonstrated a track record of effectiveness. Major cities have seen greater reductions in violence than at the national level: from 38% reduction in cities to 16% in their respective countries (UNODC 2019). Systematic reviews (mainly from the US) have demonstrated the ability of cities to reduce violence rates by 50% percent in relatively short time periods (Abt and Winship 2016).

This is not to suggest, of course, that cities are not prey to corruption and structural inequalities in the same way that national governments are. Cities experiencing high levels of violence are also home to a complex interplay of political power shifting, under-investment, structural marginalization and exclusion. Efforts that expect to see positive community feedback as a response to heavy repression in the absence of addressing the other factors will tend to be insufficient and, at times, resisted (Sampaio 2019).

Below are some examples of cities that have taken actionable steps and lowered violence:

**Cali, Colombia.** Between 1983 and 1993, homicide rates in Cali jumped from 23/100,000 to 104/100,000. In the early 1990s the mayor created an injury surveillance system, which helped to track risk factors seen to be linked to violent behavior. This analysis then informed policies, including restrictions on alcohol and firearms use, as well as support to particular individuals and families across the public sector space (i.e., schools, justice system). Although still high, in a few years homicide rates came down significantly (Carbonari 2018).

**Oakland, CA, USA.** Long considered one of the most dangerous cities in the United States, from 2012 to today, homicides and non-fatal shootings have been cut nearly in half. In 2012 the city launched Oakland Ceasefire. One of the first steps was to conduct an analysis of violent incidents and trends, which demonstrated that—contrary to narratives of a city lost to violence—it was just 400 individuals, or 0.1 percent of the total city population, at highest risk for engaging in serious violence. These same individuals came from long under-served communities, representing minority populations that have borne the costs associated with intergenerational poverty, segregation and a negative history with law enforcement. By getting specific with the individuals driving violence and better understanding the context within which violence was occurring, Oakland was able to direct specific, targeted interventions that addressed immediate incidents of violence and began to seriously tackle embedded structures of discrimination and inequality.

**Cardiff, Wales, UK.** Police-recorded serious violence declined by over 40% in Cardiff between 2002 and 2013. This has been attributed to the implementation of a multiagency information sharing strategy termed the Cardiff Model. Under this strategy, hospital staff collect data from patients and share with local police and government to facilitate identification and targeting of violence hot spots and to guide prevention opportunities. The model uses data from those incidents that don't usually reach law enforcement. In addition to the impressive results in reducing violence, the financial savings have also been substantial. Around $6.6 million is saved every year in criminal justice costs, including over $9 million in 2007 in Cardiff. Since its inception, evaluations have demonstrated effectiveness in violence reduction and cost benefit in tackling violence in cities.

What all these examples show is the ingenuity of localized analysis as well as the essential ingredient of cross-sector collaboration. Policing alone is insufficient. Further where violence is part of a political power dynamic, heavy reliance on policing limits the ability to develop strategic responses that get to the broader structural dynamics of violence. This is in large part the protest dynamics in the United States, sparked by the killing of George Floyd, a Black man, by Minneapolis police. A state-led over-reliance on police, within a

context where police have been used to maintain a white hold on power—a political dynamic—limit efforts to get to broader structural dynamics, including the toxicity of structural racism.

In another example, 'The rise and fall of pacification [in Brazil]…shows how authorities came to recognize that the fight against organized crime is not only a technical police exercise but also a local political struggle to secure and govern complex urban territories' (Sampaio 2019). Further, in Honduras it was efforts made to confront corruption, primarily within policing and security institutions, that helped to dislodge the country from having the highest homicide rate in the world. In 2016 a special police reform commission was established in Honduras. By early 2017, nearly half of security forces were removed on corruption or criminal charges. While imperfect, the process has demonstrated the power of understanding political power dynamics in fostering effective security responses (Rainsford 2019).

Cities have immense capacity to deliver impactful security and peace outcomes. To do this, they must invest in properly collecting and understanding behavior and incident level data and resisting the urge to make sweeping generalizations and instead narrow in on specific drivers of violence. Political space must also be made for investments in the kinds of anti-corruption measures that can foster effective institutions capable and willing to invest in real public safety measures.

Organized crime in cities informs and is informed by broader societal violence dynamics, including political power struggles, as well as non-organized violence. Improving relationships across disciplinary divides can help analysts see the forest for the trees, thereby investing in the right analytics and, ultimately, improved response options. The SDGs provide both a frame of reference to drill down into the necessary nuanced analytics and to build partnerships that can enable balanced approaches to lower violence in both the short and long term.

## Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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