

‘Sustaining Peace’ in the City: Perspectives on Urban Safety

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What is the role of conflict resolution and peacebuilding practice in shaping responses to crime and violence in cities? In government and diplomatic circles, ‘peacebuilding’ is frequently understood as something the UN does after inter-state or civil wars. It is also understood to involve an interventionist *modus operandi* imposed on countries. More recently, however, the UN has reviewed its approach to peacebuilding and coined the term ‘sustaining peace’ that repositions peacebuilding as activity across all stages of conflict and as a priority for the entire UN system (UNSC 2016: 1-2). This repositioning may be an opportunity to re-emphasize the “the community-based origins” of peacebuilding practice and its “multi-stakeholder, context-sensitive, inclusive and bottom-up nature” (GPP: 2015: 13). It could also assuage the fears of some governments (and mayors) that ‘peacebuilding in the city’ is about foreign intervention at the city level. A focus on ‘sustaining peace’ could therefore frame approaches in the city that build on “the use of dialogue, trust-building and consensus-seeking to resolve or manage conflict through non-violent means” (GPP 2015: 3) and the processes of “engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses and, if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict” (Miall 2004: 4; Lederach 2003).

Why should mayors consider the potential value of conflict resolution and peacebuilding practice? First, the dynamics of conflict and violence are changing in many parts of the world, with cities becoming a future flashpoint (WHO 2014; OAS 2015; GDS 2015). Traditionally, violent conflict has been associated to inter-state or civil wars; but there is a growing convergence among experts that most violent conflicts do no-longer fit these ‘traditional’ categories (Krause 2014). While wars in Syria, Iraq or Yemen make the headlines, the great majority of violent deaths occurs in non-traditional conflict settings with Central America, Southern Africa, the Caribbean, and South America being the worst-affected regions (GDS 2015: 52). Such violence is the

Mainstream conflict prevention and peacebuilding practice can offer new solutions to crime and violence reduction in cities, and can be tested in ‘city labs’

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result of chronic political instability, persistent social volatility and other risk factors. In the future, these dynamics are expected to find their violent expressions in cities, and they call for new solutions and responses.

The second reason is that the political power of crime groups has become more apparent, and an expanded tool-box is necessary to fight crime as a political issue. The political power of organized crime is well documented in research on North Africa, the Sahel, and Central and South America (Briscoe et al 2014; Kofi Annan Foundation 2012; Táger and Aguilara Umaña 2013; Shaw and Mangan 2014). In the contexts of dysfunctional institutions and weak state-society relations, crime groups infiltrate and influence local and national political systems to serve their needs and, in the process, affect institution building, urban safety and development efforts supported by national governments, municipal authorities or international donors (Wennmann 2014). Reframing the challenge of organized crime as a 'political' rather than a 'criminal' issue can enable city leaders to go beyond the default policy choice of legal and security instruments, and strengthen the case for conflict resolution and peacebuilding approaches.

So far, many city policies have emphasized repressive approaches where state authorities crush crime through 'law-and-order' or a 'war on drugs'. These approaches have, however, been largely proven ineffective in terms of violence and crime reduction (UNDP 2013). In Latin America, heavy-handed policies and securitized responses to crime and violence had tremendous human cost and led to even greater levels of violence (Jütersonke et al 2009). While securitized approaches remain popular among politicians (Gagne 2015), approaches that are integrated across a range of sectors and work at different levels have shown strong results (CCHS 2006; UNDP 2010; Eavis 2011; Comunidad Segura 2011; OECD 2011a; Gutierrez et al. 2013; Jaitman and Guerrero Campeán 2015).

What are the responses to conflict and violence that work? And how do they work? What counts as 'success' (and for whom) is highly contested in the conflicted political environments in which conflict resolution and peacebuilding occurs. But when considering 'success' as measurable reduction of violence, as the number of saved lives, and as stronger relationships to prevent, transform or resolve conflict, several components of what 'success' entails and how it is reached do emerge.

- Successful conflict resolution and peacebuilding practice has evolved from aligning several strategic building blocks, including trustworthy data, collaborative analysis, progressively expanded coalitions for change, targeted interventions that address the most acute risk factors of conflict and violence, and sustained institutional support by an honest broker (Ganson and Wennmann 2016: 168-182).
- Key principles for successful practice are relentless prioritization of the prevention and reduction of violence and conflict; engagement of the conflict parties on their partisan interests; ensuring vertical linkages within the conflict system; work within the de-facto political economy; and limiting the role of outside actors to strategic accompaniment (Ibid.: 183-191).
- Positive results also emerge from addressing conflict and violence deliberately and on their own terms; from stepping outside formal, top-down approaches; from reaching out to atypical actors; and from building systems and institutions on the foundations of those functioning parts of society that are found in even the most fragile contexts (Wennmann and Ganson 2016; Andrews 2016).

- Successful conflict resolution and peacebuilding builds on an acute awareness of labels. Labels such as 'organized crime', 'criminal', 'warlord', 'gang' or 'terrorist' can obscure the multiple facets of an individual or group, especially when the distinction between public and private, and crime and legality, is blurred. Labelling can be a deliberate political strategy to stigmatize specific individuals or groups, or to undermine peace processes or violence reduction programmes (Wennmann 2014: 270).

This practical knowledge is largely considered 'mainstream' in the fields of conflict resolution and peacebuilding; and some of it is already applied at the city level. Due to the El Salvador gang truce between 2012 and 2014, "at least 5,539 Salvadorians are alive today who would have died had the gang violence not been curtailed through dialogue and negotiation" (Wennmann 2014: 269). Many mayors in Latin America have been at the forefront of integrated programmes that have measurably reduced violence (Muggah and Aguirre 2014). A review of armed violence reduction initiatives shows that informal mediation is the most common instrument with respect to interventions targeting perpetrators of violence (OECD 2011b: 37). From the peacebuilding side, there is also a small, but growing literature about building peace in urban contexts (Jütersonke and Krause 2013; Björkdahl 2013; Milliken 2014; Wennmann 2015; Grob et al. 2016a; Grob et al. 2016b).

Despite this record, many urban safety professionals still perceive conflict resolution and peacebuilding practice as untested at the city level. In order to bring urban safety professionals closer to such practice and adapt conflict resolution and peacebuilding to the city level, 'city labs' can be an important space to build confidence and create policy space. City labs are understood as spaces for locally-led innovation to prevent and reduce violence and crime. They represent a space for the application of best practice from the fields of urban safety, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, to adapt practice from elsewhere to a specific local context, and to protect the sometimes sensitive dialogue and negotiation processes from the influence of spoilers. Overall, city labs can contribute to building stronger relationships between people and authorities in urban settings, and thereby also play a strategic role in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

For seasoned professionals in the fields of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, the current tendency to view dialogue and negotiation with perpetrators of criminal violence as something morally reproachable, illegal or impossible is reminiscent of the state of their field over 20 years ago, when the same attitudes were present in relation to the then outlawed 'liberation movements', 'insurgents' or 'rebel groups'. There is an ever better understanding that negotiating with today's outlawed 'gangs', 'crime groups', 'terrorists', or 'violent extremist' is not much different from negotiating with what is more neutrally called 'non-state armed groups' (Atran 2010; Powell 2015; van den Eertwegh 2016). What is more, research finds that terror campaigns end because terror groups join a political process or as a result of better policing (Jones and Libicki 2008; Cronin 2011). Over the last decade, the conflict resolution and peacebuilding profession evolved into a discrete, global web of facilitators and experts. These networks do the important exploratory work with armed actors – be they part of state security forces, rebel groups, or other perpetrators of violence – to assess if parties are ready for talks before more formal 'peace talks' or if humanitarian access is possible. They can also provide expertise to accompany parties during a process. Over the years such 'mediation support' has become commonplace and is supported by many international organizations and governments (UN 2012).

With the coming tide of conflict in cities and the increasing recognition that urban crime and violence are a 'political' issue, there is good reason to believe that in 20 years from now (and hopefully earlier) there is a well-established support network for mayors and other city leaders as a dedicated resource for discrete engagements with perpetrators of violence. Such networks can provide access to the expertise and know-how necessary to drive 'peace processes' in the city, and help to better protect the facilitators and the political space necessary for sustaining peace in the city.

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About the Technical Working Group

The Technical Working Group on the Confluence of Urban Safety and Peacebuilding Practice brings together focal points on urban safety of cities with peacebuilding, peace mediation and conflict prevention practitioners in order to help craft solutions to the rapidly increasing risk of conflict & insecurity in urban settings. It is co-facilitated by the United Nations Office at Geneva, UN-Habitat's Safer Cities Programme and the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. For more information, see: <http://www.gpplatform.ch/pb-city>.

About the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is an inter-agency network that connects the critical mass of peacebuilding actors, resources, and expertise in Geneva and worldwide. Founded in 2008, the Platform has a mandate to facilitate interaction on peacebuilding between different institutions and sectors, and to advance new knowledge and understanding of peacebuilding issues and contexts. It also plays a creative role in building bridges between International Geneva, the United Nations peacebuilding architecture in New York, and peacebuilding activities in the field. The Platform's network comprises more than 4,000 peacebuilding professionals and over 60 institutions working on peacebuilding directly or indirectly.

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