Policy BRIEFING

Making the Urban Poor Safer: Lessons from Nairobi and Maharashtra

Mumbai and Nairobi have acutely unequal urban development, with respectively 40 per cent and 60 per cent of their urban population living in slums. The most impoverished neighbourhoods are characterised by severe lack of service provision and poor access to employment opportunities. Urban violence is deeply rooted in the multiple vulnerabilities experienced by slum-dwellers, such as lack of steady income, lack of access to amenities and lack of connection to state resources. Yet security provision fails to address violence in this broader social and economic context, while efforts at tackling urban vulnerability often do not address its links with violence and physical insecurity. Issues of under-policing, unemployment or lack of services that shape urban violence are ultimately intertwined with the difficulty faced by slum-dwellers to interact with state authorities. Formal and informal policies need to take these local realities into account while building on local experience of what works best to reduce vulnerability and minimise violence.

Urbanisation and violence

Urban violence is a multifaceted phenomenon; it encompasses crime and gang violence, politically motivated riots, communal violence between ethnic or religious groups, and more. Urban contexts are routinely recognised as prone to violence due to individuals' anonymity and weak social ties, as well as extreme inequalities in patterns of urban development and the provision of public goods and services, which lead to strong competition (and contestation) for space and resources. In addition, inequalities in cities are rendered very visible by the spatial congruence of the very poor and the very rich. This is poignantly reflected in the acute inadequacy of housing: in Mumbai (Maharashtra state, India) 41 per cent of people live in slums; in Nairobi (Kenya) an estimated half of its three to four million residents live on approximately 1 per cent of the city's total land area. Further to that, out-of-control urban growth is seen as responsible for an increase in crime and violence as it puts absorption capacities of cities under unbearable strain.

In Maharashtra state, crime rates are comparatively low, and the main form of urban violence is rioting. Riots are persistent and widespread, with an average of over 64,000 riots per year over the last decade and 16 out of 28 states experiencing more than 1,000 riots in 2010 (NCRB, 2010). Recent research in urban Maharashtra showed that rioting and other forms of civil violence are prevalent in impoverished and under-policed urban areas: 20 per cent of respondents declared that there had been a riot or a public fight in their neighbourhood, and 14 per cent a curfew. Twelve per cent of households – mostly slum-dwellers – were directly or indirectly affected by riots.

In Nairobi, crime is very prevalent. A victimisation study conducted in 2001 (Satvrou 2002) found that 37 per cent of respondents were victims of robbery, 22 per cent victims of theft and 18 per cent victims of assault during the last year. In addition, the post-election violence of 2008 – although a national phenomenon with an estimated loss of 1,300 lives – affected Nairobi severely. Being the capital, Nairobi was a flash point, with 124 fatalities. Officially, over 72,000 were displaced in Nairobi's informal settlements, not counting the much larger number of displaced people who either sought refuge in friendly neighbourhoods in other parts of the city, or left the city for their rural homes (Kenya National ➡

Commission for Human Rights 2008). Globally, the scale of urban violence in some countries which have not even been through civil conflict, can eclipse that of open warfare in others (World Development Report 2011). Compiling data on crime and armed conflict, the report of the Global Peace Index notes that deaths by homicides in the world are more than four-fold those by armed conflict (Global Peace Index 2013, p.42).

Yet urban areas are also engines of growth and poverty reduction. The key to this apparent contradiction lies in the spatial clustering of urban vulnerability and violence. Evidence from Mumbai (as well as wider Maharashtra) and Nairobi confirms that areas where most of the violence occurs are also areas where acute urban vulnerabilities are concentrated. These violence-prone areas are characterised by poor housing, lack of service provision, and low employment opportunities. Thus to tackle vulnerabilities and violence, policies must confront this spatial clustering and its implications.

Vulnerabilities and violence
Urban violence is concentrated in neighbourhoods where people's access to services, state resources and employment opportunities are scarce. More often than not, these areas are slums where inadequate housing, sanitation and amenities render their inhabitants vulnerable to disease and natural disasters.

The connection between acute vulnerability and violence has been made in the past, but the extent of its manifestations is not always fully grasped. Original data in Mumbai and urban Maharashtra suggests that this connection takes three distinct, albeit inter-related forms:

1. Episodes of urban violence concentrate in poorly serviced and slums areas.
2. When comparing violence-prone areas, those where the lack of service provision and unemployment are most pronounced are also most affected by episodes of violence.
3. Within violence-prone areas, it is the most socially and economically vulnerable who suffer most from disruptions caused by the presence of urban violence.

Whereas points one and three are reasonably well acknowledged, the second point is not. It stresses that even between equally poor slums, there is a large difference in terms of access to services and jobs, and that this difference is reflected in violence rates.

Research in Nairobi slums confirms the importance of service provision and employment in relation to safety. Criminal violence and protection provided through hybrid criminal organisations have become a way of life in the city's poor neighbourhoods. Vigilante groups mushroomed from the late 1990s in response to worsening security in poor neighbourhoods and ineffectual, corrupt, or altogether absent policing of these areas. Some groups were first instigated by community elders in search of safer streets but quickly developed into more complex organisations that extracted protection money from small-business owners and slum dwellers. During the 2008 post-election violence, Human Rights Watch reported that the city's largest slums – Mathare and Kibera – were carved into enclaves where vigilante groups associated with different ethnic groups patrolled 'their' areas, demanding to see identity cards, carrying out evictions and attacking the homes and retail premises of members of opposing ethnic groups. During the 2007–2008 post-election violence youth militia engaged in looting for economic gain, and the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation process that led to the cessation of the violence acknowledged youth unemployment as one of the key factors. Providing employment to the youth is the most frequently reported measure that would help curb violence, including political violence, according to polling of slum-dwellers.

Different types of urban violence are inherently linked. Separating policies that address crime – for example – from those that address riots, is not appropriate. In both Nairobi and Mumbai, neighbourhoods where riots or post-electoral violence occurred tend to have prevalent crime and gang activities rooted in poverty.

To tackle urban violence, policies must address the vulnerability-violence nexus
The provision of public goods and services, and the strengthening of access to economic opportunities for an expanding youth population are vital elements of a wider-ranging strategy to address violence and strengthen security for the urban poor in the cities of the global South.

Globally, formal slum policies revolve around granting property rights in the hope that it will reduce uncertainty and foster investment. Yet, the inevitable slum relocation that follows has

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the potential to cut people from work and add to their physical insecurity. On top of this, security provision is both lacking in slum areas and most often absent from development policies altogether. In Mumbai, the police are not involved in slum rehabilitation and relocation policies other than for securing the clearance, transit and relocation of people, often with the use of force. There is no formal scope for the police to counsel on how best to provide security in former and newer sites. In Nairobi, the police tend to only enter slums for repressive actions (such as raids to target suspected criminals) and are otherwise absent and feared by the population.

There have been efforts such as the Safer Nairobi Initiative, which was endorsed by the Nairobi City Council, that aspire to a more coordinated effort to improve urban security by involving agencies and departments with mandates to deliver public services and create work opportunities. While these have had mixed outcomes, the spirit of such efforts to develop a joined-up approach is essential to improve security for the urban poor.

These interventions are, however, too few in a context of widespread youth unemployment and poverty. Further, most of these interventions are narrowly focused on entrepreneurship without regard to the fact that not all youths may have an entrepreneurial aptitude. With the exception of the work by the Kenya Ministry of Cooperatives, other policy interventions are designed for the 'youth' in general, and there is no strategic focus on those youth categories that are more likely to be recruited into criminal gangs.

While top-down joined-up approach proves difficult to implement, community-led initiatives have had success

Slum-dwellers routinely link up issues of urban vulnerability and safety. For instance, competition for scarce resources (such as communal water access points) leads to frustration and conflict. Likewise, lack of private or close-by toilet facilities make women vulnerable to harassment and attack when they travel to far away community toilets after dark. As a result, a number of community-led initiatives aimed at improving safety through vulnerability have emerged.

In Nairobi, neighbourhood-level efforts to improve the slum environment have also had positive impacts. One of these, Getto Green,

includes clearing public dumpsites and starting micro-enterprises for youths such as car-washes. The group's chair explained, 'If you are economically stable, your community will be stable. Having money prevents us from needing to steal or from being manipulated by politicians.'

Its members are, however, in constant tension with the local police who view most young people as potential criminals. The Getto Green initiative represents a more comprehensive approach to violence reduction even though its sustainability is precarious in the absence of state support. The initiative also illustrates the incoherence of state policies to reduce violence and insecurity in Kenya as the police do not see this initiative as a security solution.

In Mumbai, more formal initiatives such as the Slum Police Panchayats (SPP) and Mohalla Committees attempt to bring together slum-dwellers and police to improve safety. The Mohalla Committees emphasise peaceful Hindu-Muslim relationships and prevention of riots, whereas the SPPs have a broader aim of resolving all disputes before they turn violent. The SPP consists of a long-term partnership between one community police officer and 10 representatives of slum-dwellers (seven women and three men). At the organisational level, the scheme is a partnership between the police, the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF), and the NGO SPARC. The members of the SPP are chosen by the community, and not elected, to avoid creating differentiated status between members and non-members and acute interpersonal competition. At the heart of the SPP is the idea that the social distance between slum-dwellers and police is too high and that the former have a wealth of local knowledge on the best ways to improve local safety that the police could benefit from.

The goal of slum-dwellers participation is stated in formal slum policies such as India's flagship programme for the urban poor Rajiv Awas Yogana (RAY), but such appeals for concerted actions between citizens, state, builders and urban planners are unlikely to succeed if root causes of powerlessness and social distance are not tackled. Ceasing to see slums as dens of crime, and engineering a strong partnership between slum-dwellers and authorities (including the police) is the only credible avenue to create and sustain the sort of joined-up approach that is necessary to curb urban violence.

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Policy recommendations

- **Policies that seek to reduce urban violence must be explicitly linked with poverty alleviation strategies**
  Urban violence is profoundly rooted in urban vulnerability to such an extent that the provision of security cannot be divorced from development activities like health promotion, promoting micro-credit and savings, or improving housing. For example, employment and service generation also need to be used as a violence-reduction mechanism. This would involve, for instance, prioritising access to created jobs for people most likely to commit violence, and closely monitoring the link between job creation, service provision and violence. In turn, security providers should be able to see violence, and their efforts to curb it, in their broader social and economic context.

- **Policies that seek to alleviate urban vulnerabilities and violence must be informed by local realities and knowledge of the informal arrangements that work**
  Initiatives to empower slum-dwellers to share this knowledge, and engage with formal authorities, especially the police, should be encouraged. Slum-dwellers are the most aware of the various ways urban vulnerabilities cause violence and this knowledge should be brought to the fore in policymaking. More generally, social distance between slum-dwellers and the authorities – including the police – is large and underlines the marginalisation of the areas they live in. Enhancing citizen participation in these contexts would help address the development and security goals.

- **More data and research is needed on the extent, type and change in victimisation patterns in slums of the global South**
  Knowledge is needed to inform the policies at work in these environments. As of now, according to a recent systematic review (Turley *et al.* 2013), no rigorous study looking at the effects of slum upgrading on violence exists.

- **Innovative community-led schemes aimed at reducing urban violence must be rigorously evaluated**
  This is key in order to generate knowledge, find the particular parameters that work, and form the basis for scaling-up and formalising successful violence-reduction policies. Implementing a joined-up approach to reduce violence is difficult as key actors tend to follow their own agenda. Compelling evidence on what works will be key to overcoming institutional resistance.

Further reading

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