For the first time in history, the majority of the world’s population resides in urban centres. It is also estimated that virtually all population growth over the next 25 to 30 years will occur in cities (UN-HABITAT, 2008a, p.9). As urban areas have grown, so has the problem of urban armed violence. While urban areas are not necessarily more violent or less safe than rural areas, their size concentrates victims of violence (OECD, 2011, p. 13; World Bank, 2011a, p. 17). Armed violence thus represents a challenge not only for states, but also for local government authorities, particularly at the city level. Local government agendas typically feature security and the protection from violence as key campaigning and public administration issues. Security concerns are not limited to the realm of national governments; at the local level, residents now frequently demand local security provisions, violence reduction programming, protection from violent crime, and victim assistance.

Meeting these demands by providing the required services can be costly. In addition, high levels of urban violence impede economic and social development and undermine local governance, trapping ‘the poorest population in a dangerous cycle of poverty and violence’ (World Bank, 2011a, p. 1).
Still, cities continue to draw numerous migrants with an offer of greater economic and social opportunities. The simultaneous growth of cities and urban violence thus calls for more concerted efforts to promote sustainable development as well as effective armed violence reduction and prevention policies.

The first section of this policy paper highlights the particularities of urban armed violence and its detrimental impact on development. The following section presents a selection of the most critical risks—inequality, firearms proliferation, and limited government capacity. The paper then proposes an agenda for cooperation between the Geneva Declaration and city governments around the world, outlining several concrete steps for more effective armed violence reduction and prevention (AVRP) strategies in urban areas.

I. The challenges of urban armed violence

Compared to violence perpetrated in rural areas, urban violence tends to be more concentrated, more lethal, more variable, and less detectable, especially in larger cities. In general, cities complexify the issue of violence; among other factors, socio-economic inequalities, disorder, and volatility complicate the process of monitoring and evaluating rates and trends of urban violence.

Evidence shows, for example, that the prevalence of gangs and organized crime in urban areas makes violence potentially more lethal (OECD, 2011, p. 14; UNODC, 2011, p. 39). In the Americas, where the presence of such groups is pervasive, 74 per cent of homicides are committed with a firearm (UNODC, 2011, p. 39). In Europe, where gang and gun violence is less prevalent, firearms are used in only 21 per cent of homicides (UNODC, 2011, p. 39).

Yet, in most parts of the world, enhanced monitoring capacities and more research are required to inform policies to allow for a better understanding of the numerous manifestations of armed violence and to inform policies that can effectively reduce and prevent armed violence in urban settings (see Box 1).

Violence transforms dynamically over time and space, as reflected in changing methods, objectives, and perpetrators. Such transformation has also entailed a blurring of the line between political or conflict violence and non-political or purely criminal violence. These changes—along with the growth of transnational criminal gangs and the expansion of non-state armed groups, which can be particularly pronounced in urban areas (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 2)—represent additional challenges to designing targeted yet flexible programmes to tackle armed violence and its impact.

The heterogeneity of urban armed violence

Urban violence is unevenly distributed in geographical, socio-economic, and demographic terms. Developing countries and communities are not only more vulnerable to armed violence—whether due to limited access to health care, predatory security forces, or a weak justice system—but they also bear a disproportionally high proportion of its impact (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, ch. 5; World Bank, 2011b, p. 188).

Research has suggested that the larger and denser a city, the more vulnerable its population to armed violence and organized crime. This holds true in the Americas, for example, where population density and homicide rates seem to be correlated; similarly, populations living in the urban centres of Europe experience more crime and violence than residents of less densely populated areas (UNODC, 2011, pp. 75–77). Yet important exceptions reflect a more complex reality: ‘Megacities such as Cairo and Tokyo are among the safest cities in the world’ (World Bank, 2011a, p. 15).

Regions with high violence rates also tend to experience higher rates of urban violence (see Graph 1). In Latin America, the Caribbean, and Southern Africa, the homicide rate in the most populous cities tends to be above the national rate. It is worth noting that these sub-regions also exhibit the world’s highest national and city homicide rates.

Heterogeneity is in evidence over time and space. Around the world, young men who are between the ages of 15 and 29 and live in urban peripheries account for the great majority of both victims (82 per cent) and perpetrators (90 per cent) of armed violence (UNODC, 2011, pp. 63–64).

In contrast, the homicide rate for women does not vary significantly across age groups, confirming the theory that women are more likely to be killed in the context of domestic and sexual violence rather than high-risk activities, such as gang membership (UNODC, 2011, p. 65; Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008, p. 109). The victimization of women seems to co-vary with the overall levels of violence in urban areas, with rates thus being higher in violence-affected environments such as El Salvador and Guatemala (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 7). Underreporting and a dearth of data prevent comparisons of urban and rural victimization trends.

In general, different sectors of a city are not equally affected by armed violence. Cities that suffer from high levels of armed violence are often characterized by very safe and very unsafe sectors. In Cape Town—which reported a homicide rate of 41 per 100,000 population in 2009—44 per cent of all homicides in 2009–10 took place in the neighbourhoods of Khayelitsha, Nyanga, and Guguletu, among the poorest in the city (UNODC, 2011, pp. 79–80).

Box 1 Measuring armed violence

A number of challenges can complicate efforts to monitor and compare rates and trends of armed violence. Among these are variations in the definitions of different types of armed violence and limited access to reliable data. The most common proxy for measuring violence is the number of violent deaths (‘homicide’ or ‘murder’ (UNODC, 2011, p. 16). Yet legal and statistical definitions of ‘homicide’ vary, rendering cross-national comparisons difficult (Gilgen and Tracey, 2011, p. 58).

While data is also collected on other crimes, injuries, and violent events, it is not necessarily comparable. Nor do official or media records always provide specifics regarding the type of harm experienced by the victims, the perpetrators, the instruments used, or the context in which violence occurred. Violence against women is particularly poorly monitored and, in all likelihood, significantly underreported (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 138).
While this heterogeneity must be taken into account in the design of policies to prevent and reduce armed violence in urban areas, potential ramifications of targeted interventions should also be considered. The focus on young men as the most likely victims and perpetrators, for example, has led certain policies to stigmatize youths or even entire neighbourhoods that suffer from high levels of violence, such as gang-controlled areas. Iron-fist policies, such as those implemented in several Latin American and African countries, are a case in point. In some cases, they have criminalized aspects of a person’s appearance, such as tattoos and certain types of clothes, or even the mere fact of being in the streets (Ribando Seeleke, 2011, p. 10).

A development opportunity

Armed violence has a negative impact on various aspects of development. At the national level, limited progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—which seek to combat poverty and hunger, increase primary school enrolment, and decrease infant mortality and adolescent birth rates—tends to be accompanied by high levels of armed violence (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 146). While cities and urbanized countries have been found to progress more rapidly towards the MDGs than rural areas, urban violence remains a key concern. In terms of development costs, it erodes human and physical capital, entrenches inequalities, and reduces productivity and investment. Estimates of the costs of armed violence in countries such as Guatemala and Colombia show that more affluent, more densely populated areas see much larger losses than rural, less densely populated areas (Matute and Narciso, 2008; Villamarín, forthcoming).

The urban environment, while offering attractive socio-economic opportunities, also seems to provide a context in which violence can grow. Indeed, urbanization brings its own development challenges, as some countries are unable to respond to the demands of rapid urban growth. Migration from the countryside to cities can overstretch infrastructure, social services, and security providers. Meanwhile, informal arrangements can exacerbate inequalities in terms of access to social services and opportunities while allowing for the emergence of parallel social, economic, and political orders. Such informal communities—termed the ‘fourth world’ by Manuel Castells (1999)—function as a hotbed for gangs, armed groups, radical religious movements, and criminal organizations.

In terms of development, cities can thus represent a dilemma. On the one hand, they offer the promise of a better life, not least through job opportunities and more effective security provision. On the other, rapid urbanization and frustrated hopes can have negative effects on the security situation of a city, especially in the periphery (Jütersonke, Krause, and Muggah, 2007, p. 164). How to provide security in these conditions is among the key question guiding the design of development strategies.

II. Urban risks: engaging local governments

Local governments are at the forefront of addressing development concerns arising from rapid, uncontrolled urbanization. Meanwhile, the extension of democracy to local administrative levels has led to growing demands for security—to which local authorities must increasingly respond.

Although cities offer a set of ‘protective’ factors that could reduce the impact of armed violence—such as increased...
police presence, vigilance through camera surveillance, and better access to medical care—they can also be home to significant risk factors that sustain or facilitate armed violence, such as inequality, segregation, poverty, illicit markets, and drug trafficking (UNODC, 2011, p. 12). The engagement of local governments in matters of armed violence reduction and prevention is thus indispensable.

Once both risk and protective factors of the urban context have been identified, coping strategies and AVRP policies can be designed and implemented—often in cooperation with the residents whose needs are to be met. In this context, Lucía Dammert offers a three-pronged typology of risk reduction. The first axis—“social prevention”—focuses on the prevention of violence through the reduction of social risk factors that might lead an individual to commit crimes. The second—“situational prevention”—aims to minimize the opportunity to commit crimes through interventions in hot spots, formal and informal surveillance, and the enhancement of urban spaces and services. The third axis—“community prevention”—combines social and situational prevention to promote initiatives such as neighbourhood watches (Dammert, 2009, pp. 127–28).

**Inequalities and inclusion in the urban environment**

Urban inequalities—whether vertical (between individuals) or horizontal (between sectors or groups)—cause frustration and provide perverse incentives for risky behaviour (UN-HABITAT and UAH, 2010, p. 81; Stewart, 2008). Inequality and exclusion are experienced in marginalized neighbourhoods, anywhere from a city’s centre to its periphery; it is often the result of rapid and uncontrolled urbanization or deterioration through urban stagnation. Urbanization may entail unequal access to common goods, resources, and economic and social opportunities (UN-HABITAT and UAH, 2010); in turn, these inequalities can exacerbate the vulnerability of individuals and families living in marginalized neighbourhoods (see Box 2), providing fertile ground for informal activities, precariousness, and crime (UN-HABITAT and UAH, 2009). Strong forms of horizontal inequality can give rise to group-based conflicts—which can escalate into a spiral of violence and insecurity (Stewart, YEAR, p.).

In view of the development agenda at the urban level, violence prevention and reduction efforts must aim to secure the potential benefits of social, cultural, and economic integration for excluded populations. Using Dammert’s axis typology, interventions can be modelled along the following lines.

- **Social prevention axis:** Cities need to strengthen communities by fostering and activating networks that reduce the space for criminal action through the collective definition and application of norms. Furthermore, cities must ensure the safety all people, both in the public and in the private spheres. Local governments should also develop and guarantee the implementation of projects that protect vulnerable populations, such as school violence prevention initiatives and domestic violence reduction programmes (including safe havens, victim assistance, and educational programmes).

- **Situational prevention axis:** Cities may incorporate a localized approach when formulating inclusive and participatory activities that foment civic responsibility and respect for public spaces. The protection, preservation, enhancement, and renewal of degraded urban areas is key to the eradication of stigmatization of vulnerable public spaces. A city must also ensure access to landmarks and places that carry a symbolic value to strengthen social cohesion among inhabitants.

- **Community prevention axis:** AVRP programmes may include strategies for the enhancement of local ownership through the reconstruction of social tissue, including the mobilization of citizens for an active co-production of security and the adoption of a community-based approach to infrastructure development. Local governments should also promote means of community mediation to allow residents to channel their specific demands or to identify conflicts.

**Box 2 Urban insecurity in Johannesburg**

The growth of informal settlements has continued to outpace government capacity for urban planning and the provision of affordable housing to low-income South Africans. Survey respondents in Johannesburg indicate that this growth has also contributed to high levels of violence and crime in their communities. Perpetrators reportedly take advantage of the poor environmental design of informal settlements, whose lack of negotiable roads often prevents emergency vehicles and motorized police patrols from entering. Respondents also highlight the issue of access to services. The lack of electricity inside dwellings and in the streets of informal settlements exacerbates feelings of insecurity, especially when it is dark.


**The proliferation of firearms and organized crime**

The easy accessibility of firearms—a recognized risk factor for violence—helps shape the dynamics of armed violence in cities around the globe. Together with the presence of organized crime and illicit markets, it affects both the level and scope of armed violence. Indeed, a high prevalence of firearms-related violence is common in areas where the overall rates of violence are also high, as is the case in the Americas (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 100).

Organized crime is manifest in urban areas in the form of territorial control and illicit trafficking by criminal networks (such as drug trafficking organizations and corrupt officials). Organized crime may be defined as a social network with inter-city and inter-state connections, formed by individuals who engage in illicit activities over an extended period of time for the purpose of self-enrichment (Flores and González, 2008, p. 52). While organized crime usually does not have political pretentions, its activities do have political consequences as they undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of state institutions (p. 52).

Gangs are present in cities around the world. They and can be defined as youth
groups that endure over time and whose members have street-oriented lifestyles and a recognizable identity (Klein and Maxson, 2006, p. 4). Gangs are mostly comprised of youths in their teens and early twenties and may resort to criminal activities. As noted above, some policies that target these groups criminalize everyday behaviour (such as spending time on the street), potentially stigmatizing collective identities (Young, 1999; Brotherton, 2007). These policies can strengthen the sense of joint resistance, which functions as the social glue of groups such as gangs (Castells, 1999, p. 26). It is worth highlighting that gangs often have ties with formal institutions and, in some cases, take on economic, political, cultural, religious, or military roles within their communities (Hagedorn, 2007, p. 309).

Community policing is a central aspect of arms control and the prevention and reduction of violence linked to organized crime and gangs. Police reform has led to a more community-oriented policing strategy based on the acknowledgement that ‘security is a task for all’ (Dammert, 2009, p. 122); this shift represents a departure from control-oriented policing towards the inclusion of prevention mechanisms into local security plans (p. 139). On the one hand, this new style of policing promotes a rapprochement between the police and communities; on the other, it encourages associative relations with the broader community—including its business associations, local clubs, and unions (Chalom et al., 2001, p. 8).

Local governments can initiate numerous projects and activities to reduce and prevent armed violence linked to the accessibility of firearms and the presence of organized crime and gangs. Using Dammert’s framework, such initiatives may be categorized as follows:

• **Social prevention axis:** Cities should focus on the promotion and development of pedagogical sensitization activities that take into account the particular characteristics and dynamics of different social groups (such as punks, skinheads, and politically motivated groups), concentrating their efforts on at-risk youths while avoiding unnecessary stigmatization of this group.

• **Situational prevention axis:** ‘Disarmament networks’ that include several institutions (both local and national) have shown positive results. The establishment of gun-free zones is another option for the prevention and reduction of urban armed violence. Tackling school-related violence is also an essential aspect of AVRP. Local governments must spearhead these programmes and should provide public space for alternative, peaceful forms of social, political, and cultural interaction.

• **Community prevention axis:** At the community level, the credibility of disarmament campaigns is based on residents’ confidence in the capacity and transparency of the police forces. Parallel to sensitization efforts, local governments thus need to work on the professionalization of police forces and the promotion of community policing.
Goverance and governability

Institutional consolidation and governance are crucial to a city’s approach to the prevention and reduction of armed violence. The lack of government capacity to provide basic services, particularly security, causes a power vacuum that non-state actors may be able to exploit. In countries such as Brazil, Pakistan, and South Africa, for instance, certain urban areas have fallen under the control of armed actors who use their power over both territory and population for their own economic interests (OECD, 2011, p. 14).

High levels of armed violence undermine a state’s governance capacity as formal institutions lose control over certain areas (World Bank, 2011a, p. 2). Yet the presence of urban armed violence does not necessarily point to a failure of the state; nor would it be possible to prevent and reduce armed violence solely by strengthening the state. Nevertheless, urban armed violence does challenge the legitimacy and capacity of institutions, calling for effective solutions, as policies ‘that do not involve transforming institutions may postpone rather than solve problems’ (World Bank, 2011b, p. 86).

For AVRP in urban areas, the construction of security is a collaborative process between civil society and the government. Civil society organizations should thus legitimize all security-oriented interventions and programming and their opinion on public action needs to be monitored closely (Petrella and Vanderschueren, 2003, p. 159).

In this context, local governments can provide a space for articulating different policies and facilitating cooperation between actors, such as civil society organizations, and the central government (Appiolaza and Ávila, 2009, p. 9). Calling for such an approach, one guide to local prevention strategies finds that:

[It is crucial to develop capacities and commitments with the communities, the local government, and the state. This is only possible if local governments follow certain minimum standards of good governance in terms of transparency, responsibility and efficiency (UN-HABITAT and UAH, 2009, p. 72).

Indeed, violence is closely related to issues of residents’ participation and local governance, since ‘security should be seen both as a service delivered to citizens and an area of responsibility for citizen engagement’ (World Bank, 2011a, p. 85). From an AVRP policy point of view, local governments should:

- Reform the institutional framework of security and armed violence prevention and reduction, with an aim to produce more efficient and comprehensive policies.
- Create policies for peaceful coexistence and preventive security, with the goal of promoting resident participation. Local governments need to legitimate and protect civil society organizations to facilitate their access to financial resources, information, and knowledge.
- Promote greater participation and empowerment of all social actors in AVRP activities to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of local public policies.

For a synthesis of the different risk factors and the corresponding proposed interventions, see Table 1.

Table 1 A typology of risks and intervention levels in urban areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk factors</th>
<th>Social prevention</th>
<th>Situational prevention</th>
<th>Community prevention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inequalities in the urban environment</td>
<td>• Strengthen communities by fostering and activating</td>
<td>• Incorporate a localized approach when formulating</td>
<td>• Enhance local ownership of the reconstruction of social tissue;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>networks that reduce the space for criminal action;</td>
<td>inclusive and participatory activities that foment</td>
<td>Mobilize residents for an active co-production of security;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ensure the safety of women and children by developing</td>
<td>civic responsibility and respect for public spaces;</td>
<td>Adopt a community approach for infrastructure development;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and implementing domestic violence reduction programmes.</td>
<td>• Protect, preserve, enhance, and renew degraded urban areas;</td>
<td>Promote means of community mediation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firearms proliferation and organized crime</td>
<td>• Promote and develop pedagogical sensitization activities that take into account the particular characteristics and dynamics of different social groups;</td>
<td>• Promote and implement inter-institutional 'disarmament networks';</td>
<td>• Promote residents’ confidence in the capacity and transparency of security providers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Concentrate efforts on at-risk youths but avoid stigmatization.</td>
<td>• Establish gun-free zones;</td>
<td>Professionalize the police forces and promote a ‘localized police' (community policing).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-cutting risk factors: governance and governability</td>
<td>• Reform the institutional framework, aiming to produce more efficient and comprehensive policies;</td>
<td>• Prevent school-related violence;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Legitimate and protect civil society organizations so as to facilitate their access to financial recourses, information, and knowledge;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Promote greater participation and empowerment of social actors to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of local public policies.</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Source: authors’ elaboration based on Appiolaza (2010, p. 32); Dammert (2009, pp. 127–31).
III. A road map for cities

The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development formulates a set of mechanisms and opportunities for AVRP activities at the local level. Signatory states have committed themselves to support initiatives that measure the human, social, and economic costs of armed violence, assess particular risk factors and vulnerabilities, and evaluate the effectiveness of violence reduction programmes (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008, p. vii). Yet a viable plan for linking local city initiatives to work at the national and international levels is yet to be agreed.

Addressing AVRP at the city level allows for a multidisciplinary approach, proximity to key issues, and great flexibility with regard to interventions. Indeed, promising, creative, and evidence-based initiatives to reduce and prevent armed violence are frequently developed by cities rather than central governments (ICPC, 2005). In short, cities themselves may be able to counteract the problem of urban armed violence.

The following points are designed as a roadmap to assist further integration of local governments (ICPC, 2005). In short, cities themselves may be able to counteract the problem of urban armed violence.

The following points are designed as a roadmap to assist further integration of local governments in the process initiated by the Geneva Declaration.

• Cities should diagnose not only the symptoms, but also the multiple underlying factors that may cause violence, crime, and insecurity within their boundaries. A particular accent on measuring the human cost of armed violence is central to future urban AVRP policy. Urban observatories of armed violence—rather than crime—are an indispensable tool for monitoring the impact of armed violence prevention and reduction programmes.

• Policies and action plans, integrating security and development priorities such as urban planning, social prevention, security, and governance, must be based on ‘whole-of-city’ approaches that have proven successful.

• Police forces are a key actor for AVRP and should exercise their authority in close cooperation with residents, whose needs should be identified through specific diagnostics and the promotion of a comprehensive and preventive approach.

• Local governments play a crucial role in the development and evaluation of successful AVRP experiences; they could thus assume more of a leading role in international processes such as the Geneva Declaration.

• Armed violence is transnational in nature and does not recognize country borders. Consequently, the development of a metropolitan coordination mechanism is essential for cities that are close to borders.

Linking the national to local level is also crucial in terms of optimizing trans-border AVRP assessments and strategies.

• Cities should promote the exchange of best practices and inter-city collaborations for the development of innovative AVRP initiatives through platforms such as city-to-city exchanges.

• The development of common methodologies and capacities for measuring armed violence and insecurity is crucial for the formulation of a precise, evidence-based diagnosis. Such assessments enable the targeting of symptoms as well as of the structural causes of violence while facilitating the rigorous monitoring of the effectiveness of AVRP initiatives.

• Local governments should promote the organization of an international event on AVRP and urban security within the next two years, in order to call for enhanced cooperation between local and national governments and an increased engagement of cities in international mechanisms such as the Geneva Declaration. Such an event could take place during the World Urban Forum in Italy in 2012.

Endnotes

1 Emilia Frost is a researcher at the Bogotá-based Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC); Matthias Nowak is a visiting researcher at CERAC and an associate researcher at the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey. This policy paper builds upon a forthcoming working paper prepared by Franz Vandeschueren and Martín Appiolaza, as well as an unpublished background paper prepared by Elkin Velásquez for the Geneva Declaration Secretariat (Vandeschueren and Appiolaza, Forthcoming; Velásquez, 2011).

2 This paper uses the term ‘city’ to refer to a ‘built-up or densely populated area containing the city proper, suburbs and continuously settled commuter areas’ (UN-HABITAT, 2008b, p. 10).

3 Armed violence, as defined by the Geneva Declaration Secretariat, is understood as “the intentional use of illegitimate force (actual or threatened) with arms or explosives, against a person, group, community, or state, that undermines people-centred security and/or sustainable development” (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008, p. 2).

4 See, for example, Red Argentina para el Desarme (n.d.).

5 Based on FESU (2006).

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The Geneva Declaration

The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, endorsed by more than 100 countries, commits signatories to supporting initiatives intended to measure the human, social, and economic costs of armed violence, to assess risks and vulnerabilities, to evaluate the effectiveness of armed violence reduction programmes, and to disseminate knowledge of best practices. The Declaration calls upon states to achieve measurable reductions in the global burden of armed violence and tangible improvements in human security by 2015. Core group members include Brazil, Colombia, Finland, Guatemala, Indonesia, Kenya, Morocco, the Netherlands, Norway, the Philippines, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. Affiliated organizations include the Bureau of Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO). For more information about the Geneva Declaration, related activities, and publications, please visit www.genevadeclaration.org.