More Slums Equals More Violence: Reviewing Armed Violence and Urbanization in Africa

Contents

Introduction .................................. 2
Dimensions of the Problem .... 2
Interventions and Prevention. 7
Conclusion ..................................... 8
Suggested Readings..................... 8

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Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development
www.genevadelaration.org

Conference Background Paper
Introduction

The majority of the world’s population today live in cities. The uncontrolled development of informal settlements in many cities has led to the expansion of slums and shantytowns. In Africa figures show that in 2005 approximately 40 percent of the population live in urban areas with this number estimated to rise to 50 percent by 2030. Even more alarming, more than half of Africa’s urban populations reside in slums. The concentration of the poor in cities and the peripheries is expected to continue, with dramatic increases in pace and scale in developing regions such as Africa.

Residents of sprawling slums and shantytowns are exposed to heightened exposure and risk of criminal violence, narcotics and communicable illnesses, all of which constitute potent determinants of armed violence. Because they are often located outside the reach of formal policing institutions, impoverished slums are less able to enforce the regulation of the trade and use of weapons, including firearms. There is an estimated 30 million small arms and light weapons on the African continent, of which approximately 80 percent are in civilian hands, it is likely that marginalized areas of Africa’s urban landscape will become home to ever-growing arsenals.

As the scale and distribution of urban armed violence in Africa evolves, some agreement on the types of risk factors contributing to its onset and spread on the continent have been identified. These include:

- **Structural factors** such as limited education, under- and unemployment, income inequality and uncontrolled urban planning.
- **Proximate factors** include segregation and urban density, cultures of masculinity, limited faith in public security, informal social organizations such as gangs and militia, and arms availability.

There is also a strong link between countries emerging from war and the onset of urban violence – usually of a political and criminalise form. This is usually accompanied by the erosion of emerging democratic and development institutions.

It is important to remember that there is ‘neither a simple nor a necessary causal link between urbanization and armed violence’. This paper explores some of the links between urbanization and armed violence within the African context, examining the nature and impact of particular aspects of armed violence such as firearm homicides and the emergence of criminal gang activity and vigilantism. The paper also considers possible approaches to reduce urban armed violence, drawing on lessons learned in other developing regions.

Dimensions of the Problem

Large-scale, rapid and unregulated urbanization has been associated with increased rates of violent crime. The inability of government institutions to keep up with such demographic growth has undermined public safety perception, which in turn complicates the public provision of security and justice to citizens. Such environments act as ‘breeding grounds’ for armed criminal gangs and vigilantism creating an unvirtuous cycle of human insecurity.

In many parts of the developing world, more and more young people are leaving their rural homes, where returns on cash-crop and subsistence farming continues its relentless decline, and are being drawn to the city. Rural-urban migration has picked-up as cities occupy the centre of commerce, trade and investment. Likewise, as national populations continue to grow and the youth bulge expands – particularly in Africa – the pressures on cities to keep up with the demands of a growing labour force are increasingly difficult to sustain.

Homicide and victimization

As the accompanying background paper on conflict and crime notes, it is difficult to determine the distribution or incidence of homicide in Africa. Reliable comparable data is scarce. Likewise, peer-reviewed

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1 Written by Robert Muggah, Small Arms Survey and Anna Alvazzi del Frate, UNODC. This paper also draws substantially on three sources: WHO (2008); Small Arms Survey (2007) and Moser and Winton (2002).
2 Small Arms Survey (2007).
4 Small Arm Survey (2007).
5 Moser and Winton (2002).
and published literature on the incidence and impacts of armed violence is limited – especially in Africa.\(^7\) Despite these poor reporting rates, Africa still appears to register comparatively high rates of homicide.

**Firearm homicide**

The continent carries approximately 18 percent of the global burden of firearm deaths – the vast majority of which are homicides.\(^8\) Military-style weapons are reported to have been used in more than a third of the region’s homicides, over one tenth of its robberies and a considerable proportion of assaults, threats and sexual offenses. Some countries are more affected than others: South Africa, for example, has the highest incidence of armed criminal violence, with more than 19,000 homicides (40 per 100,000) in 2006 and at least half of these resulting from fatal firearm injuries.

Homicide and firearm-related violence is highly sex-specific. The gender profiles of armed violence in Africa follows a global trend.\(^9\) Males are four to ten times more likely than females to be murdered. For example, the adult mortality and morbidity project (AMMP) measured the rates and causes of morbidity and mortality of Tanzanian residents in three communities (one urban n: 64,756 and two rural n: 146,359) from 1992-1998 and showed that the average age adjusted rate of homicide deaths for females was 3.4 per 100,000 as compared to 16.5 per 100,000 for males.\(^10\)

**Victimization data**

On closer inspection of reported rates of urban armed violence in specific countries and cities, it appears that Africa ranks high in comparison to other regions. For example, successive Crime and Victim Surveys (CVS)\(^11\) administered in more than 75 cities from the early 1990s to 2005 determined that both Latin America and Africa experience the highest rates of robbery and assault: 13 percent of all robberies and 9 percent of assaults and threats in the world are committed with firearms in Africa. The highest victimization rates associated with armed robbery in Africa in 2006 were reported in Nairobi (37 percent), in specific Mozambican cities (27 percent) and the Republic of Congo (21 percent).

**Box 1 Crime and Victim Surveys (CVS) and Arms in Africa**

The CVS conducted by United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) consist of a general victimization survey that includes questions on the real and relative distribution of firearms ownership, type of arms and motives for ownership. Globally, less than ten percent of all interviewed households in urban areas declared that they owned a firearm, with approximately six percent of all households reporting a handgun. Among those possessing weapons, almost two thirds declared that they kept it for self-defense from crime. In African cities, however, the percentage of handgun owners was higher (eight percent). Survey data on Africa, and indeed globally, likely underestimates the share of gun-owners. Although respondents were reassured about survey anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, very few of the illegal owners may have admitted to being in possession of a weapon to the interviewer.

There is a widespread assumption in the literature that the availability of arms leads to their use for self-defense and ultimately in the committing of crime.\(^12\) This association appears to hold in the African context. For example, findings from a 2004 CVS in Johannesburg, South Africa reveal that a considerable number of declared gun-owners reportedly used their guns for self-protection.\(^13\) A small scale sample of respondents reveals that approximately one third of all owners claimed to use the weapon, with a small number firing it and leading to self-inflicted and other forms of injury. Likewise, in a selection of African countries where sufficient data is available, there appears to be a correlation between homicide and rates of firearm ownership (0.917 (n=5) in Africa as compared to 0.522 (n=34) globally).\(^14\)

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8 WHO (2002).
11 The Crime and Victim Surveys (CVS) were conducted in more than 75 countries between 1989-2005 with the involvement of the UN Inter-Regional Crime and Justice Institute (UNICRI).
12 See, for example, Small Arms Survey (2006) for discussions of the ‘accessibility thesis’.
14 Since the data come from two independent sources, it can be excluded that the two are interrelated.
Figure 1  Percentage of households claiming to own firearms, African capital cities or large urban areas: 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% of households owning a firearm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Verde</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesotho</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Small Arms Survey 2007, based on data from CVS and SAS.

Firearms – including various types of military assault rifles – are commonly reported in criminal victimization, a legacy of the continent’s many internal conflicts (see Figure 1). The incidence of gun-related victimization was highest in Johannesburg (more than half of the robberies were at gunpoint) and Lagos (one-third reported the use of a firearm). Recent surveys in Malawi also reveal that while robberies are reportedly quite rare (only 31 cases or 0.5 percent of the sample), a firearm was used in at least one third of all reported incidents.¹⁵

The dynamics of criminal violence in Africa exhibit some commonalities with experiences registered in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as Western Europe. In surveyed African cities, firearms are more likely used in the case of property crimes than in violent assault. For example, armed robbery was reportedly committed in two-thirds of all reported cases in Africa, the offenders usually being young males working in groups of three or more and unknown to their victims.¹⁶ In the case of assaults and sexual violence, in over half of all reported incidents, the offender and the victim reportedly knew one another, at least by sight.¹⁷ Across all reported cases, female victims were reportedly less frequently attacked with firearms than their male counterparts.

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¹⁶ Small Arms Survey (2007).
Gang violence and vigilantism

Armed violence and crime in major African cities are inextricably connected to the complexities of urbanization, although less clearly linked to large-scale gang activity as seen in Latin America. This often centers on land usage disputes, both between various social groups and between these groups and the State. This is particularly evident where states adopt expropriation policies excluding marginal groups from land use and public services. For example, armed vigilante groups such as the Bakassi Boys (active in Aba, Nigeria) often become intertwined in the competition for resources between competing groups.

Rapid urban expansion in Africa is connected to a crisis in (urban) governance fueling unemployment and the inability of public police forces and the security sectors of many countries to provide adequate protection. This in turn has led to the growth of predatory gangs, self-defense groups and so-called vigilantes. A characteristic of gang and vigilante violence is that it is responsive to the quality and quantity of public security. It appears that armed violence is not only aggravated by weak and unprofessional police services but also by their explicit involvement in organized and un-organized criminality. There are many examples of how the formal security sector engages in and perpetrates criminal violence. Examples tend to be anecdotal:

- In Cameroon, as many as 84 members of the police, gendarmerie and army were reportedly prosecuted for banditry.\footnote{Atanga (2003).}
- Police personnel from Ghana and Nairobi are repeatedly accused of collaborating with criminals, often lending or leasing their own arms and clothing, enabling what are often referred to as ‘pobbers’ (police-robbers).\footnote{Aning (2003).}

\begin{table}[h]
\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Country & Homicides (%) & Robberies (%) & Assaults (%) & Sexual Offenses (%) \\
\hline
Botswana & NA & 7.3 & 0 & 0.8 \\
Guinea & 8 & NA & NA & NA \\
Burkina Faso & 9.5 & NA & NA & NA \\
Lesotho & 55.7 & 4.8 & 12.4 & 3.2 \\
Mozambique & NA & 4.4 & 7.31 & 4.6 \\
Namibia & NA & 7.3 & 5.1 & 2.5 \\
Nigeria & NA & 27.3 & 9.4 & NA \\
South Africa & 48 & 58.5 & 28.3 & 14 \\
Swaziland & NA & 72 & 6.9 & 2.2 \\
Tanzania & 7.5 & NA & NA & NA \\
Uganda & NA & 9.9 & 5.9 & 3.0 \\
Zambia & 50 & 5.9 & 2.5 & 0 \\
Zimbabwe & 65.5 & 6.1 & 2.0 & 2.3 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}
\end{table}

Note: Use of firearms in homicide figures is at the national level and calculated from Small Arms Survey (2004). Use of firearms in other types of violent crime is drawn from 1,000-1,500-respondent ICVS surveys administered in the capital cities of the respective countries (van Kesteren, 2003).
• In Nigeria, a number of army soldiers and police officers have been sentenced to death for armed robbery.\textsuperscript{21}

Ultimately, any collaboration between formal security and criminal entities – even the perception of collusion – tends to weaken public confidence in the State.

Communities react in different ways to the escalation of both organized and disorganized criminal violence. For example, private security companies (PSC) are rapidly proliferating in cities and towns while vigilante and militia groups are spreading rapidly throughout low-income and rural areas in Africa. The economic costs of such PSC are considerable: in Zambia, local-level spending on private security facilities accounts for more than double the total annual criminal justice system budget.\textsuperscript{22} In Kaduna city in Nigeria, for example, the number of clients subscribing to PSC tripled between 1997 and 2001. Ghana recently registered more than 110 PSC in the country while in Cameroun, there are more than 180 such services employing as many as 15,000 staff.\textsuperscript{23}

By way of comparison, vigilante and neighborhood militia usually consist of volunteers organized at the community-level to patrol communities and are often provided with modest monthly stipends from amongst affected neighborhoods. In Kaduna city, Nigeria, for instance, vigilante services cost about USD 4 per month per household. Residents of rural Zonkwa have to pay less than USD 0.15 a month, although wealthier households and authorities contribute larger sums. In many cases, households are also resorting to arming themselves with both craft and locally-manufactured firearms. As citizens invest in informal security provision, it potentially reduces their capacity to invest in other forms of productive inputs, including health and education.

\section*{Interventions and Prevention}

The phenomenon of urban armed violence forces us to rethink our approach to development programming and interventions. The fact that urban violence is influenced by multiple risks including structural and proximate factors complicates attempts to translate national government commitments into actions that prevent or reduce urban violence.

Country states have tended to react to urban violence and related symptoms in urban spaces in three ways, these include:

• \textit{‘coercive’ measures} – entailing forcible search and seizures;

• \textit{‘compliance-oriented’ interventions} – seeking to enhance legislation and programmes to encourage deterrence; and

• \textit{‘voluntary’ initiatives} – with a focus on building support locally and stigmatising ostensibly bad behaviour.

The key lessons learned are that a combination of all three approaches is most effective, that they should be grounded in evidence, and that they ought to be undertaken together with strong partnerships between state and civil society institutions.

Youth unemployment and urban violence constrains governance and meaningful development – a fact that policy makers and donor governments are now starting to recognize. With criminal violence exceeding rates commonly witnessed in war zones, this recognition comes not a moment too soon. Indeed, the effects of urbanization and violence are ultimately felt most profoundly at the local level - with mayors, elected politicians, civil servants and community leaders on the front line.

The involvement of local government structures is key to successful policy responses and intervention programmes as has been shown in cases in Africa and in Latin America. The challenge remains however, in providing direct support for initiatives focusing on reducing unemployment locally, supporting safer communities and preventing violence.

\textsuperscript{21} Small Arms Survey (2006).
\textsuperscript{22} Mthembu-Salter (2003).
\textsuperscript{23} Atanga (2003).
Innovative approaches to supporting youth-focused programmes in urban environments emerge primarily from Latin America and the Caribbean. This has included an analysis of the urban environment, perceptions of violence, and access to victimization data. For example, in Colombia – Bogota, Cali and Medellin all applied for and obtained loans from the Inter-American Development Bank in the 1990s to finance violence prevention and public safety programmes focusing on youth.

Drawing on Moser’s work in Latin America, using a range of tools to assist both policy makers and practitioners will allow them to develop appropriate and successful armed violence prevention and reduction programmes. Moser identifies three key phases that need to be followed in this regard:

- **Phase 1 – Analytical:** Requires an understanding of the different components of violence which includes identifying the causal factors – both historical and economic and social.
- **Phase 2 – Descriptive:** Seeks to systematically map out the multiple manifestations and types of violence, which then need to be systematically categorised into manageable groupings or types, ranging from institutional violence to gang related violence and domestic violence.
- **Phase 3 – Operational:** Requires adopting a range of intervention programmes, appropriate and sensitive to diverse contexts.

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**Box 2 The Safer Cities Programme of UN-HABITAT**

Launched in 1996, the Safer Cities Programme supports the development of local capacities to adequately address urban insecurity and thereby developing a culture of crime and violence prevention. The Programme promotes and supports the responsibility and potential role of local authorities as actors of urban crime prevention.

The programme has developed over time a rigorous approach to the analysis of the local situation, and the formulation of local crime prevention strategies, supported by broad partnerships and civic participation, that identifies and addresses urban crime problems in both a short and long term perspective.

Active over the past 10 years in more than 10 countries’ capitals and major cities in Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, South Africa), as well as in other regions (Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America), the Programme supports a local process of partners mobilization and coalition building, as well as building the capacity and institutional frameworks for sustaining integrated crime and violence prevention strategies over time. The Programme has also developed a series of tools and a comprehensive toolkit to support city-wide crime prevention initiatives.

For more information: [http://www.unhabitat.org/](http://www.unhabitat.org/)
Conclusion

Trends both in Africa and worldwide indicate that urban armed violence is intimately connected to the structural dynamics of urbanization, as well as to the competing interests of each social group, and is therefore both a result of and a catalyst for change in the urban landscape and its reorganization.\(^{24}\) Responding to urban armed violence therefore requires a thorough understanding of these dynamics.

- Sustainable urban planning and public safety programmes must assume a growing priority in national development planning strategies. Thus reducing large-scale and uncontrolled urbanization which is currently associated with increased rates of armed violence and decreasing levels of public safety.
- The combination of several structural and proximate factors such as, rapid and unregulated urbanization, visible and pronounced inequality and unregulated arms availability, is increasingly acknowledged as among the primary risk factors associated with escalating criminal and armed violence in Africa. A combination of coercive, compliance and voluntary programmes must be undertaken to address these and other risk factors.
- Evidence and a good multi-disciplinary understanding of urban violence must back any policy response as well as inform subsequent intervention and prevention programmes. A greater focus must be devoted to enhancing institutional capacities to record and monitor patterns and dynamics of armed violence if meaningful interventions are to be planned, executed and monitored.

Suggested Readings


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