Discussion paper

Plural security provision in the city: Options for constructive local engagement

Summary

Violence is an obstacle to the achievement of development progress. In the fragile and conflict-affected countries of the Global South, an array of non-state coercive actors offer local populations a form of order, especially (but not exclusively) where the state is absent, or its presence deleterious to citizen security. Some non-state actors are characterized by a level of legitimacy, local ownership, effectiveness, proximity, and cost-effectiveness that renders them a feasible alternative to state security provision; many are prone to human rights violations, perverse interface with the state, and inversion of security outcomes. Generally, they are unlikely to deliver long-term positive security outcomes for citizens.

In the informal urban settlements where the population of the Global South is concentrated, non-state actors are the primary providers of security for most people in most circumstances. Over the past decade, interest in the capacity of such actors to deliver citizen security has grown among policymakers and academics frustrated by the failure of fragile and conflict-affected states to establish an effective monopoly of legitimate violence.

The state remains an important instrument for advancing security as a public good. This is especially true of local government: it is closer to citizens, more inclined toward non-coercive policy responses to insecurity, and benefits from economies of scale in achieving collective action and resource mobilization. UN-Habitat proposes to establish a collaborative research and action network in response to the potential for constructive local engagement of plural security provision at city level. The network will generate knowledge and inform policy,

enabling academics and local policymakers to proactively and innovatively meet the challenge to effective urban governance posed by non-state security providers.

Non-state security providers: Context and typology

The ideal of the state monopoly is both contemporary and exceptional; historically, many states have not possessed a monopoly of legitimate coercion, and many never claimed it (Giustozzi 2011). Today, in many of the burgeoning cities of low- and middle-income countries, the absence or distance of the state from informal settlements leaves such communities open to ordering by a panorama of sub-state governance actors that function durably and enjoy local legitimacy (Haas et al. 2013). In other cities, a dysfunctional or perverse state presence deepens violence in pernicious ways. In either case, security provision grows diffuse, with the simultaneous operation of multiple actors making claims on the use of force. Non-state security providers conduct illegal and often lucrative informal economic activities by replacing the state in supplying protection and basic services, and are deeply linked to local informal land tenure configurations (Arias 2010, p. 121). The current international statebuilding paradigm views this pluralism as pathological, a symptom of dangerous state fragility (Andersen et al. 2007)

Building on the definitional work of Baker (2004, p. 165) and Schneckener (2009, pp. 8-9), non-state security providers are defined here as:

> *actors characterized by the ability and willingness to deploy coercive force, lack of integration into formal state institutions, and organizational structure that persists over a period of time, that seek to ensure the maintenance of communal order, security and peace through elements of prevention, deterrence, investigation of breaches, and punishment.*

Analyzing non-state actors as security providers must start from the assumption that they can, in principal, opt to produce security or insecurity, i.e. provide protection from violence or engage in violent practices. Changing competitive conditions in security markets (the spatial and temporal coincidence of the demand for and supply of security where the means of violence are not monopolized) shape the decisions of coercive groups either to use violence against the civilian population or to invest in the provision of security (see Brancović & Chojnacki 2011). Security markets are not only about the distribution of material resources by force; the most important commodity at stake is often protection. The relationship between a non-state security provider and potential beneficiaries of protection, as well as the wider public, contours the incentives, expectations and behaviour of both sides, since almost all non-state coercive actors require some level of social support to survive (Kalyvas 2006).

The broader literature on political order in weak states argues that non-state coercive actors can be conceptualized as agents of security governance, or nodes in a security provision network (Wood & Shearing 2007). The institutions of the state define the space in which non-state nodes in the network can provide order and security (and, to some extent, vice versa). Some non-state security providers command the state's recognition, sponsorship, or tolerance, collaborating with its courts and police services to co-produce public goods; some are exploited, with the state co-opting them to project its rule; others are ignored, marginalized, isolated, criminalized, or violently subverted.

Non-state security providers are thought to be so numerous as to deliver more than 80 per cent of security-related services in Africa, and a similar proportion in other fragile and conflict-affected contexts[1]. The spectrum of non-state security providers is described in a number of taxonomies[2] and embraces religious police; rebel movements, guerrilla armies, paramilitaries and warlords; paramilitaries; militias; local authorities like customary chiefs and elders with armed retinues; criminals and narco-traffickers organized into mafias, syndicates, or larger networks; neighbourhood gangs; voluntary vigilante groups; secret societies; the security arms of occupational and trading communities; and informal local government security structures.

Advantages and risks of non-state security provision

Within the rich literature on non-state coercive actors[3] there is an increasingly influential perspective that questions the validity and value of working to establish a Weberian state model when it is not achievable in the medium-term in much of the Global South. Rather than seeking to rebuild state power, other options that dilute norms of sovereignty by relying on plural security provision to maintain order may be a "least bad" solution. For advocates of this perspective, the main question is: "what already works?" (Albrecht & Kyed 2011, p. 5). Drawing on a number of authors, the following summarizes common claims regarding the advantages enjoyed by non-state security actors:

- *Legitimacy and popularity*: With or without state consent, non-state security providers may acquire legitimacy by controlling territory and enforcing order, imposing taxation, or appealing to cultural or religious authority. They possess knowledge of

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[1] This estimate is widely cited (for example, in OECD 2007), but un-supported by quantitative evidence.
[2] See for examples: Bagayoko 2012; Lawrence 2012; Okumu & Ikelegbe 2010; Schneckener 2009; Baker & Scheye 2007.
[3] See for examples: Scheye 2011; Albrecht & Kyed 2010; Ebo 2007.

the cultural topography, and strong roots that encourage local cooperation (Ahram 2011). Where evidence of public opinion exists, people profess preference for non-state providers (Alemika & Chukwuma 2004).

- *Local ownership:* A decentralized approach to insecurity may be more responsive to the actual needs of communities than a technocratic state-led approach (Baker 2012). Public participation in the production of security through such non-state channels may also strengthen social cohesion (Bénit-Gbaffou et al. 2008).

- *Effectiveness and efficiency:* Studies point to the effectiveness and efficiency of non-state security providers, including several well-documented cases in which they delivered a dramatic decrease in crime (Kantor & Persson 2010). Research in Timor-Leste indicated that more than 80 per cent of respondents believe their local providers to be fairer and more trustworthy than state alternatives (Scheye 2009).

- *Proximity and relevance:* Local security providers are often more linguistically and culturally accessible (including to the illiterate), physically proximate, cheaper, and quicker (Derks 2012; Albrecht & Kyed 2010). They "resolve neighbour disputes, restrain antisocial behaviour, protect homes at night, and return stolen goods more consistently and effectively than official police" (Baker 2010, p. 4).

- *Cost effectiveness:* From the perspective of state policymakers and international donors, engaging non-state structures may be more cost-effective than elaborate statebuilding efforts (Lawrence 2012). Non-state providers are in place and ubiquitous, and present readily-available partners where the state is weakest.

Notwithstanding the advantages outlined above, the risks associated with this form of security provision are well-documented, including:

- *Human rights violations:* Non-state security providers respond to perceived threats to the dominant social order and protect people from what is locally defined as crime, disorder, immorality, or deviance (Plyler 2007). As such, they are "typically sympathetic to male primacy, conservative sexual morality and a denial of rights to the criminal or the child," (Baker 2012, pp. 285-89), and the security they provide more associated with human rights violations.

- *Perverse interface:* Evidence suggests that many non-state coercive actors persist in part because they enter symbiotic relationships with established power. Colombian

paramilitaries and *donos do morro* (local strongmen) in Rio de Janeiro deliver votes to sympathetic officials in exchange for lax law enforcement and protection from evictions for their communities (Acemoglu et al. 2013; Arias 2006). The state is often complicit in vigilante activity, by failing to prosecute those who act outside the rule of law (Omeje 2005).

- *Outcome inversion:* There is no evidence that a long-run tendency for violent non-state actors to gravitate toward positive citizen security outcomes can be taken for granted (Meagher 2012, p. 1081). To the contrary, analysis of militias (Merz 2010), vigilantes (Schuberth 2013), and gangs (Rodgers 2009) observes an almost ineluctable tendency for non-state actors that are net producers of security to become net producers of insecurity over time—a reflex of agents confronting resource scarcity unconstrained by accountability and pressure for normative compliance.

- *(Mis)policing pluralism:* In some instances, non-state security actors align with sectional interests; in such instances they are ill-suited to providing a public good to out-group members, or addressing transactions that extend beyond their own constituencies (Scambary 2012; Kirsch & Gratz 2010). In diverse cities occupied by heterogeneous users, "the plurality of laws and of law enforcers, with ill-defined powers and overlapping spheres of operation, make it difficult to settle violent conflicts" (Harnischfeger 2010, p. 70).

- *Competitive statebuilding:* In contexts of plural security provision, the state is likely to compete intensely for the loyalty of citizens with sub-state orders, a process Felbab-Brown identifies as "competitive statebuilding" (2013, p. 151). Scholarly arguments that non-state security provision might compensate for security deficits in order to "buy time" for formal institutions to stand-up (Boege et al. 2008, p. 15) are faced with a lack of convincing evidence that non-state security providers empowered in the short-term will ultimately subordinate themselves without violent resistance[4].

- *The resort to indirect rule*: In the informal city, the sub-contracting of security provision to non-state actors like vigilantes and local barons has become a cheap way for the state to divest itself of policing costs (Pratten 2008; Raeymaekers et al. 2008). Moreover, a normative focus on the local "tends to screen out the influence of non-

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[4] It is worth noting scholarly disagreement on the relationship between revival of traditional authority and state fragility; Englebert (2005), for example, argues that resurgent traditional authority is more common in strong states.

local actors on the kinds of local orders that emerge" (Meagher 2012, p. 1082), and proxy arrangements that simply ratify those with coercive power at the local level.

A non-state security strategy?

International development policymakers and practitioners have grappled with non-state security provision for decades. Statebuilding interventions have endeavoured to expand the state's ability to broadcast security provision across its territory by co-opting, supplanting or eradicating non-state actors. Since 2004, a more inclusive approach has emerged (see, for example, DFID 2004). International donors now acknowledge that efforts to improve access to security for citizens in fragile and conflict-affected contexts oblige them to work within the empirical reality of plural provision[5] (World Bank 2011; OECD 2007).

A traditional understanding of the state as the sole legitimate provider of security may be defensible as a normative preference, but deeply flawed as a description of the existing security environment in most countries, and a weak basis for policymaking. While critical perspectives on complex governance realities typically offered few practical suggestions for international engagement, in recent years, a number of scholars have sought to turn their critique into an alternative programme for action. At the core of their argument is the observation that those forms of order that have held fragile and conflict-affected societies together should be regarded as constitutive of positive development (Meagher 2012). These scholars call for a "non-state security strategy" re-focusing on what works for the end-users of security provision, rather than for security providers (see, for example, Luckham & Kirk 2012), and on what is seen as legitimate security, rather than "what ought to be" as dictated by Western norms.

Across the relevant literature, three general elements of such a "non-state security strategy" emerge: a shared model of regulation, wherein the state dictates the broad parameters of security provision; coordination to achieve systematic coverage; and enhancement of non-state security provision quality. Detailed blueprints vary. Baker describes "multi-choice policing," in which numerous authorizers and providers of citizen security coincide (2008, p. 7), while Debiel advocates integrating state and non-state in a "layered" security governance model (2005, p. 15). Wulf (2007) proposes adherence to the twin principles of subsidiarity for practice and supremacy for norms: the lowest level should be the starting point for the monopoly of violence, while primacy in norm-setting should be top-down, with the state a sort of network regulator, ensuring equality of access and respect for human rights.

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[5] As is the case, for example, in regards to justice provision (see Isser 2011).

Engagement with the non-state poses real challenges for the political and bureaucratic nature of donor agencies. The literature acknowledges that the imperative of statebuilding renders non-state security providers uneasy bedfellows for international development agencies constrained by a dominant statebuilding agenda that devalues engagement outside the state. Donors are averse to upsetting relationships with state partners, conferring legitimacy on groups with unpalatable goals or tactics, empowering particular factions over competitors, and creating a precedent for violence as a path to political privilege (Denney 2013; Derks 2012). Moreover, the plausibility of a non-state security strategy "ultimately rests on whether national or international actors can find local security providers that are able and willing to commit to a reform agenda" (Lawrence 2012, p. 13). In the end, while engagement of non-state actors is risky, it is no more so than the engagement of state security agencies that donors have sustained for years (Denney 2012, p. 2).

Constructive local engagement

As an empirical matter, that the state's preeminence among a constellation of actors delivering security is dimmed or exhausted is hardly in doubt. Less certain is how the notion of security as a public good can be sustained in the absence of a common institutional framework able to exercise what might be called "meta-authority" (Loader & Walker 2001) over the wild profusion of coercive actors. While it cannot be presumed that the state is a nonpareil vessel of collective action for public safety, there are few attractive alternatives for addressing the coordination problems, frictions, and inequalities that emerge from a dispersed and crowded security market.

This paper is predicated an argument that the city is an ideal site for tackling the aforementioned dilemma. Cities cluster risks associated with violence and disorder, due to dense and chronic poverty; steep economic inequality; the reduced trust, solidarity and social control associated with rural-urban migration and the anonymity of urban life; and the presence of transnational organized crime and illicit markets. As a result, cities increasingly bear the heaviest share of the global burden of violence (see, for example, Muggah 2012; Geneva Declaration Secretariat 2011). Yet there appears to be an "urban advantage" in security provision. This can be explained with reference to two features:

(1) *Propinquity* (as per Jütersonke & Krause 2013). The proximity of the local state to its citizens renders it more sensitive to signals of stress and unrest, and exposes it to scrutiny that responsiveness and accountability. The proximity of citizens to one

another renders coordination of interests easier, and the benefits of mutual cooperation more discernible, in an urban context.

(2) *Scale.* It is easier and cheaper to effectively deliver services to a densely concentrated urban population than a widely dispersed rural population. If harnessed effectively, the dense and vital economic base of the city can provide tax resources to finance public goods, including security.

Moreover, as the local order of government seldom has direct control over uniformed state security providers, local governments are compelled by necessity to use other policy levers to impact citizen safety and security. Emerging evidence indicates that superior prospects for establishing a functioning, responsive, inclusive state exist at city level—and that local authorities can, in turn, deliver improvements in citizen security even in contexts of state dysfunction or violent conflict (Kaplan 2012; Arias 2010). To cite just one example: UN-Habitat's Safer Cities Programme has supported the utilization of an approach grounded in urban governance, planning, and service provision to deliver significant improvements in citizen safety and security in more than 75 cities[6].

The key challenge for scholars and practitioners alike is to understand what is entailed in sustaining the idea of security as a public good in the context of plural provision. Fundamentally, the state remains the only claimant to the privilege of setting goal-posts and adjudicating conflicts; it is certainly *primus inter pares* in relation to other security actors. It retains the ultimate authority to convene, adjudicate, supervise or license, structuring security governance both in its presence and in its absence, and furnishes "an indispensable container for the negotiation and mobilization of the very subjective meanings through which an adequate and equitably distributed security provision is possible" (Loader & Walker 2004, p. 226). The local state, close to the urban population and plugged-in to its everyday realities, is a uniquely suitable site for such a democratic contestation between citizens and collectivities, and generating and sustaining more inclusive forms of political community.

A network for research and action on plural security provision in the city

UN-Habitat proposes to establish a collaborative research and action network in response to the potential for constructive local engagement of non-state security providers described in the previous section. The purpose of the network will be to generate knowledge and inform policy on plural security provision in urban contexts, with a particular focus on the ways and

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[6] See UN-Habitat (2007) for more detail on the Safer Cities evidence base and approach.

means of effective local government engagement. With a number of world-class research institutions at its core, and the active participation of urban policymakers, the network will enable a variety of stakeholders to engage productively around plural security provision and the challenge it poses to effective urban governance. UN-Habitat proposes to convene and act as secretariat to this emergent network.

The coordination of research and action agendas through a collaborative network will:
- increase the quality and quantity of the stock of policy-relevant knowledge , and ensure better coverage of the full range of research thematics
- provide a more holistic understanding of key issues and their interconnections by enabling greater inter-disciplinarity and cross-sectoral teamwork
- improve inter-institutional debate, exchange and cooperation, and strengthen professional consensus on contentious issues
- strengthen the visibility, credibility and reputation of products emanating from the research process
- nourish dialogue among researchers and decision-makers to ensure knowledge products are relevant, timely, and taken-up
- operationalize high-potential local government policy innovations, and create a margin for risk-taking
- present a level of neutrality, impartiality and independence that would be impossible for any single entity to convey

The participation of local policymakers in the network will be vital. Evidence flows into policy and practice more quickly when policymakers contribute actively throughout the process leading up to policy recommendations. Policymakers will have the opportunity to review the research, to engage with the pragmatic knowledge of experienced network members, and participate in the design and formulation of recommendations. As they participate, their policy frames will morph; under these conditions, "transfer" becomes moot. Later implementation of an action agenda based on policy-relevant knowledge products will be smoothed by this iterative engagement in the lead-up.

Experimentation with non-state provision in regards to security is particularly risky and provocative, since it challenges the state's supremacy in an area considered one of its constituent domains. As a means of ensuring effective engagement and mitigating associated risks, the network will conduct its activities according to strict principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Transparency will also be a core working principle: as a standard operating practice, the network will keep all stakeholders in a particular context (state, local government, non-state security providers, civil society) appraised of its activities.

Expediting the link from knowledge to practice, the network will pursue (1) a research agenda and (2) an action agenda, with inter-related but distinct goals and indicative activities.

1. Research agenda

Initial research priorities might tackle key questions such as:

- What illustrative anecdotal experiences of constructive local government engagement with non-state security providers can be analyzed for policy-relevant insights?
- What internal characteristics of non-state actors can be used to identify viable partners for constructive local government engagement? Is a certain level of consistency, predictability and internal cohesion necessary? What incentives, hierarchies, and command structures keep non-state counterparts organized and cooperative?
- As transnational criminal or political linkages may exacerbate the risk of outcome inversion, what is the political economy of non-state security provider linkages with transnational actors, and can insights be extracted from analysis that might guide strategies of engagement?
- Similarly, given the risks associated with capture of non-state security providers by political actors in urban areas (as, to cite two recent examples, in Jamaica and Libya), how can pacts or deals be forged with non-state entities in ways that reinforce positive citizen security outcomes and, ultimately, state authority?
- How do local understandings of groups' legitimacy change over time, and accordingly adjust the social expectations brought to bear on non-state actors? There may be fertile ground to push forward innovative understandings of the so-called "social contract from below".
- How might local governments negotiate implementation of innovative approaches to plural security provision that are incongruent with the policies of other orders of government—as has been the case, for example, in regards to implementation of gang truces in El Salvador (Peeters et al. 2013, p. 3)?
- Does non-state security provision strengthen or undermine the relationship between citizens and the state, and under what circumstances are positive effects on that relationship magnified?
- Can the popular sanction underpinning non-state service provision offer sources of legitimacy that might be harnessed for bottom-up statebuilding (as argued, for example, by Podder 2013)?

- How can vulnerable constituencies, such as women and girls, youth, suspected and convicted criminals, and households with insecure land tenure, advocate for and realize their rights in the context of plural security provision?
- How can public resources be utilized in ways that enable poor and marginalized communities to realize their collective interests within complex security markets and a fractal security governance landscape?
- Is it possible to stimulate and support local voices, especially embedded researchers and community organizations, to produce policy-relevant knowledge in context-specific security vernaculars?

2. Action agenda

As the network's research output cements its visibility, credibility, and reputation, opportunities to grow policy influence through tangible interventions will multiply. Subject to further deliberation by network members, three areas of concrete action might be feasible:

(1) *Supporting local authorities to engage non-state security providers.* Improving cooperation and coordination between state and non-state mechanisms might commence with a mapping of who is providing which security functions. Subsequently, the network might conduct stakeholder analysis and facilitate dialogue and consultations; promote a functional division of labour based on subsidiarity; and deliver support to local authorities to legislate, regulate, coordinate with, and monitoring the performance of the non-state security sector, consistent with standards established through an action-learning process. The network might advise police and other official bodies on good practice in collaborating effectively with non-state actors.

(2) *Improving the quality of non-state security provision.* In some instances, the violation of human rights by non-state security providers is a matter of lack of education and awareness (Barfield et al. 2011). In that spirit, the network might engage with non-state security providers directly, in order to promote adherence to national and international standards, especially with regards to human rights obligations, use of force, and public accountability. It might provide training for non-state security providers that have subscribed to basic norms and standards[7], and play a proactive role in monitoring and verifying the implementation of their commitments.

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[7] A potential model for this approach is the Deed of Commitment under Geneva Call, to which non-state actors commit on issues such as the protection of children during armed conflict.

(3) *Brokering good donor practice relevant to plural security provision.* In conjunction with donor agencies, the network might develop good practice guidance for donors supporting peacebuilding, security reform, and stabilization policies and programmes affected by plural security provision. Promoting dialogue among donors, and between donors and governments, would be essential to strengthen coherence and synergies in responding constructively to non-state security providers.

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