Reducing the Human Impact of Urban Violence

Estimates suggest that by 2050 urban dwellers may account for 86 per cent of the population in more-developed regions and for 66 per cent of the population in less developed regions. In addition, the most rapidly urbanizing areas are in less developed countries, with half of the population of Asia in urban centres by 2020, and Africa reaching a 50 per cent urbanization rate by 2035.

The process of rapid urbanization brings a number of challenges for local and national Governments. In the last 20 years, crime has increasingly become a major problem in the world’s cities. Building secure cities is therefore of utmost importance in the prevention of violence and crime and the protection of urban populations. A failure to provide public security can result in levels of violence that are comparable to or exceed those experienced during a civil war. The impacts are particularly significant for youth, women and children, as their recruitment into or their exploitation through organized crime and endemic community violence tends to rise.

Furthermore, the rapid economic and demographic shifts in many of the world’s cities have resulted in the deepening of urban poverty, the proliferation of slums, and their consequent human development challenges. Ensuring that urban infrastructure is sufficient to provide housing, sanitation, health and education services to urban dwellers requires resources as well as strong institutional capacity and good governance. If not, marginalized urban communities may be exposed to disease, pollution and poor basic services that exacerbate the lack of public safety and security.

A Human Security Approach for Addressing Urban Violence

Human security provides a comprehensive and flexible approach that can account for the complexity of factors contributing to urban violence. The multitude of interconnected factors at the institutional and community levels that lead to urban violence and crime—weak governance, poverty, poor access to basic services such as education and health, a lack of social cohesion, among others—cannot be addressed in isolation from one another. They require an integrated and multi-sectoral approach that addresses the structural causes of urban violence, increases community resilience and emphasizes participation in promoting individual and community safety.

Human security recognizes the need to combine institutional and community-based strategies in developing adequate responses. Non-state actors, such as gangs and vigilante groups, can undermine
State institutions and take advantage of localized “governance voids”. Through the protection and empowerment framework, human security identifies gaps in governance and justice systems that can be exploited, as well as mechanisms for strengthening public participation to counteract their presence. As a result, efforts to strengthen institutional capacity can be better informed by citizen’s experiences, leading to more preventive and better-targeted measures.

By promoting participatory processes, the human security approach supports the development of networks of diverse stakeholders and the creation of formal mechanisms for collaboration. This can increase dialogue between Governments and their citizens, resulting in improved levels of trust and greater civic engagement. In addition, it promotes frequent interaction and communication among urban residents, which can build positive social capital and increase social cohesion.

**From Theory to Practical Actions – The UNTFHS tackles urban violence in El Salvador and Madagascar**

Projects funded by the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) have empowered communities to address the complex challenges of urban violence and crime, while reinforcing local and national protective mechanisms that are responsive to citizen insecurity. These projects have sought to improve essential service infrastructure and delivery, expand employment opportunities, enhance social cohesion, establish dialogue and collaboration between authorities and people, and build the capacity of law enforcement and the judiciary. Based on their success, several projects are currently being scaled up or implemented in other regions through the support of the respective Governments or additional funding sources. Below are two examples from UNTFHS funded projects where urban communities are faced with multiple human security challenges which require comprehensive responses through which different domains of human security can be addressed.

Fifteen years after the negotiation of the Peace Accords that brought an end to more than a decade of conflict, significant advancements had been made in conflict resolution, crime reduction and human development in many regions of **El Salvador**. However, the dividends of peace and development were slow to reach vulnerable and marginalized communities in the western Department of Sonsonate. In 2005, Sonsonate had one of the highest homicide rates in the country, with 62 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants compared to a national average of 54.5. Moreover, insufficient law enforcement allowed the proliferation of youth gangs, drug trafficking, firearms, and gender-based violence. Communities in Sonsonate also endured the country’s highest levels of poverty, with institutional birth coverage rates well below the national average, as well as limited access to education.

To address these interrelated human security threats, the project, which ran from March 2008 through June 2011, applied a comprehensive approach to improve the immediate and long-term security of the population by: (i) advancing coordinated action between public institutions and civil society; (ii) improving urban spaces for better safety and security; (iii) implementing strategies for the prevention and reduction of armed violence; (iv) strengthening prevention against intra-family violence, sexual exploitation and human trafficking; and (v) promoting efforts to reduce gender inequalities. As a result, the project strengthened citizen security, promoted inclusive urban development, fostered peaceful
co-existence, and built productive State-society partnerships.

Successfully reducing violence and crime required an integrated and multidimensional approach that addressed the multitude of interconnected factors at the institutional and community levels in Sonsonate. Since violence took many forms—gender-based, gang-related, and organized criminal networks—awareness-raising activities to change attitudes regarding violence were coupled with institutional efforts to restrict access to firearms, reduce gender gaps in employment and decision-making positions, and enforce formal protective mechanisms, particularly for children and youth. Combining these measures made it possible to build a broad network of stakeholders who together could begin to assert coherent control over the territory and promote conditions to counteract crime and violence.

In order for the network to function effectively in a region where trust between communities and public institutions was lacking, the project emphasized the critical need for a mutually reinforcing protection and empowerment framework that would strengthen State-society relationships. Top-down protection measures included building the capacity of police forces and the leadership skills of local mayors, while bottom-up empowerment activities ensured that communities were engaged in developing security policies and community programmes at the municipal level. This created a broader and more comprehensive vision of how institutions and communities identify their respective roles in building citizen security and maintaining peaceful coexistence.

On the institutional side, the project highlighted the crucial role of local authorities as the first line of defence against threats and as the most responsive partners for civil society. A context-specific approach therefore focused on building the capacity of municipal authorities as well as developing stronger and more effective partnerships among municipal, national and regional authorities. This allowed for the necessary up-streaming and down-streaming of policy decisions, thereby filling gaps in the protective architecture and giving municipal authorities the flexibility to develop more targeted and preventive responses to improve citizen security at the local level.

As an essential complement to this institutional and community capacity building, urban infrastructure was overhauled to create a safe and communal environment. Working together, municipal authorities and local communities constructed community centres, rehabilitated school facilities, and remodelled sports grounds and common areas. Reclaiming these public spaces and using them for cultural and recreational activities, with particular emphasis on children, adolescents, women and indigenous people, greatly improved personal and community security. Moreover, community-wide sporting events and festivals supported the strengthening of social cohesion and community pride, both of which are critical elements for ensuring public safety.

Ensuring citizen security in Sonsonate also depended upon the inclusive engagement of community members, in particular at-risk or disenfranchised groups such as youth. Too often the positive contributions of such groups are neglected, threatening long-term social capital development and increasing the potential for anti-social behaviour. By combining better enforcement of policies to protect children and adolescents with the provision of diverse educational and vocational opportunities, children and youth were engaged as active participants in community development and peaceful coexistence.

To learn more on human security – including the work of the Unit, the Advisory Board and the UNTFHS’s current projects and guidelines – visit www.unocha.org/humansecurity
Ultimately, the project highlighted how the human security approach can result in comprehensive, collaborative and systemic strategies that can bring together the inputs of various stakeholders and lead to effective actions to prevent violence and build social cohesion. Moreover, the application of the protection and empowerment framework united the roles and responsibilities of different actors under a shared vision, which contributed to the efficient use of limited resources and lasting partnerships.

Since 2009, the cumulative effect of frequent natural disasters, the global economic and food crises, and an extended period of political instability has severely threatened the human security situation in Madagascar. At the same time, the relentless pace of urban migration has concentrated the country’s population in the capital, Antananarivo, where over 70 per cent of the population lives in informal settlements and almost 30 per cent endures severe food insecurity. These sub-standard settlements or slums lack basic social services and are characterized by dilapidated sanitation and waste disposal facilities that pose dire consequences on the health conditions of these communities. At the same time, political instability coupled with a lack of economic opportunities, has created a highly insecure environment for the urban population of Antananarivo, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable. Today, a large number of Antananarivo inhabitants are threatened by interpersonal violence as well as increasing crime rates. The ongoing crisis, if not addressed, can result in new vulnerabilities and greater suffering in the future.

To improve the human security of the most vulnerable populations in Antananarivo, the project which started in May 2011 seeks to: (i) establish community-based mechanisms and networks to empower communities to manage the reduction of economic, sanitary, environmental and personal insecurities; (ii) support the establishment of local instruments to prevent and reduce violence and reinforce personal security; (iii) improve living conditions through the continuous delivery of basic services and a more stable economic base; and iv) anticipate the risks of deterioration through monitoring and preparedness at the city-level. As a result, the project aims to provide concrete and sustainable benefits to the target beneficiaries by lowering exposures to threats such as violence and illness; promoting a more peaceful and communal living environment; and enhancing business and employment opportunities.

By applying a context-specific human security analysis, the project, in close consultation with the participating communities and the relevant authorities, has identified personal, economic, environmental and health insecurities as the main determinants of human insecurity in Antananarivo. Subsequently, an integrated and comprehensive human security strategy that targets communal violence, unemployment, inadequate basic services, infectious diseases, and the impact of natural hazards was established as priority activities to be supported by the project. By identifying these priorities and by bringing together a diverse network of stakeholders, the implementation of the project has resulted in the development of a coherent cooperation mechanism that capitalizes on the wide-ranging expertise of UN agencies, the knowledge and capacities of the participating communities, and the commitment of the Government.

To target the full spectrum of threats that cut through every aspect of life in Antananarivo’s informal settlements, and to ensure that activities supported by the project are sustainable, the need for implementing the human security’s mutually reinforcing protection and empowerment framework was highlighted during the design of the project. For example, top-down protection mechanisms that address the inter-linkages between the spread of disease, waste management, violence, and healthcare are implemented in combination with bottom-up measures that include the priorities of partners at the.
As a result, activities identified by the project are better targeted to the real needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of the participating communities. Furthermore, by building on existing capabilities, the project empowers communities to establish networks that promote greater participation in community-based activities. Subsequently, through developing community preparedness strategies, the project strengthens the capacities of communities to provide early warning and to mitigate the impact of current and future natural disasters. The cumulative impact of these measures is resulting in a proactive community culture that is united in improving the resilience and in safeguarding the human security of the participating communities. Such an approach is crucial to ensuring the sustainability of the improvements in the lives of vulnerable urban communities in Antananarivo.

**Latest News and Events**

A **High-Level Event on Human Security** will be held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on **8 May 2013**. Drawing on the wealth of lessons learned from UNTFHS funded projects, the event will bring Member States together with Heads of UN Agencies, Funds and Programmers and key civil society organisations and individuals working on human security to discuss the implementation of GA resolution 66/290 and to lay the foundation for the future implementation of human security within the United Nations.

The Human Security Unit is pleased to share its latest publication entitled ‘**Lessons from the Field: Applying the Human Security Approach through the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security**’. The publication provides a more in-depth analysis of the application of the human security approach in the areas of climate change, peacebuilding, migration, urban violence, and health with case studies from projects funded by the Trust Fund.

The Human Security Unit is conducting a **Survey on Human Security** which has been sent to UN Member States, Heads of UN Agencies and Department, UN Country Teams, regional organisations, as well as academic institutions and non-governmental organisations working in the field of human security. Pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 66/290, the survey is an important means to collect lessons learned from the implementation of human security, as well as inputs on where and how the human security approach can be best applied to strengthen the work of the United Nations. If you have received the survey, kindly submit your inputs to the Human Security Unit.

As a component of the UNTFHS funded project in Ghana entitled “Enhancing Human Security through Developing Local Capacity for Holistic Community-Based Conflict Prevention in Northern Ghana”, a **Human Security Conference** will be held in Accra on **22 and 23 May 2013**. The conference will share lessons learned from the UNTFHS project in Northern Ghana to facilitate mutual learning between the project’s stakeholders - UN agencies, beneficiaries, local and national institutions - and other non-programme stakeholders, such as researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

The **Civil Society Network for Human Security** released the latest edition of its **newsletter** featuring updates on the Network’s activities over the past 2 months as well as upcoming events and useful resources.

The UNTFHS funded project ‘Sustaining Livelihoods Affected by the Aral Sea Disaster’ in Uzbekistan was featured in the UNDP **Voices from Eurasia** blog. For regular updates, please visit the project’s blog which can be found on the UNTFHS **Uzbekistan** country page.

The **2013 Caux Initiatives for Human Security** will be held from **29 June to 12 August** and will cover seven sessions on various human security topics from land and conflict to inclusive governance.

In January 2013, the seventh revision of the **UNTFHS Guidelines** was released in English and French. Applying agencies are requested to refer to this revised edition when submitting concept notes and project proposals.

To learn more on human security – including the work of the Unit, the Advisory Board and the UNTFHS’s current projects and guidelines – visit [www.unocha.org/humansecurity](http://www.unocha.org/humansecurity)