

Security system reform in urban spaces

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Identifying security system reform (SSR) programs with a specific urban focus — that is, programs that are explicitly designed for urban rather than rural environments — can be difficult. However, cases in post-conflict cities such as Freetown, Sierra Leone, and in non-war cities such as San José, Costa Rica; Bogotá, Colombia; and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, point to some early positive results of urban-based SSR programs.

Broadly speaking, while few SSR programs are deliberately structured for the urban environment, policing reforms in particular are urban-tailored by default. There are two main reasons for this. First, the population density, volatility and political significance of cities ensure that urban requirements take priority as far as donors and national authorities are concerned. Second, public police forces work mainly in urban areas. Indeed, rural areas in the South are more likely to be policed by community-based or vigilante-style groups than by public police.

Circumstantial evidence also suggests that consciously urban-tailored programs can mitigate or reduce violence. For example, an appropriately trained and resourced police force can prevent small-scale urban looting or rioting from getting out of hand.

Similarly, police who are subject to civilian oversight may be less corrupt, politicized or repressive.

At the operational level, a recent policing development which responds to the needs and features of the urban environment is community policing. Most models of community policing focus on proactive crime prevention. They feature officers assigned to specific communities in order to establish long-lasting relationships with, for example, neighbourhood groups, business and civic leaders, and schools, as well as to increase police visibility. Cities are in some ways organic entities, so weaving police into the urban fabric in this way is a necessary condition for effective and transparent justice. This may be taken as a given in many Western societies, but consensus between the police and the local populace can be difficult to achieve in a society such as Nigeria's, where the federal — and riot — police are drawn from outside their operational locality (Nigeria's constitution does not allow local or state police).

Another aspect of SSR that might benefit from urban tailoring concerns the volatile relationship between police and military forces in many cities. This is usually at the expense of public safety. The streets of Lagos, for

example, are full of soldiers and police independently manning traffic check-points, each seeking bribes. This is not a specifically urban problem, but it is most evident in cities, and its repercussions are most severe in urban areas. As one example, a United Nations official estimated that up to 75 percent of Dili's 120,000 population fled East Timor's capital in May 2006 after clashes between several hundred former soldiers and police.¹

A few cases help to illustrate the potential of urban-specific SSR programs. In Sierra Leone, for instance, community policing (or local-needs policing, as it is known) was introduced through partnership boards established at the local level, and special emphasis was placed on dealing with the vulnerable and those who had suffered most during the war. Furthermore, urban SSR was important to Sierra Leone because the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was based in Freetown. Not only was peace tied to reform as far as most Sierra Leoneans were concerned, but donors also believed that reforming the country's notorious police would encourage support for Kabbah, their protégé.

Success has been easier to measure statistically in community policing programs implemented in non-post-