

Final report

This final report is the summary of the key ideas raised both in the written submissions of our experts, and in the subsequent conference calls. Most of the content stems from the March 2006 Fast Talk, but key findings from the October 2005 Fast Talk are also included.

Failed and fragile cities

What causes city fragility or failure, whether as a result of external attack or internal decay?

Expert consensus was difficult to forge on this question. Some felt city fragility is due to external factors. For example, terrorism increasingly targets cities, while states are turning to 'infrastructural wars' designed to throttle urban dissent and living, e.g. state-perpetrated violence using bulldozers, rockets, and other implements targeting urban civilian structures in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Others, however, felt that city fragility is the result of the "implosion of global national politics into the urban world." These "implosive forces that fold into neighbourhoods the most violent and problematic repercussions of wider regional, national, and global processes" include ethnic tensions; fundamentalism; militarization of gangs, police, militias, and other armed groups; state failure; arms proliferation; rapid urbanization and a youth bulge; increasing social polarization; resource scarcity; structural adjustment programs; and deep unemployment (usually defined as more than 20%).

Urban infrastructure, while the source of much urban vitality, can also be a key source of fragility. The reliance of cities on technical, networked infrastructures to bring in food, energy, information, and people, and move out products and waste makes this infrastructure a target for state or non-state terrorist group violence. Moreover, heavily mechanized and networked cities have lost the skills necessary to provide essential services for themselves when disasters or war disrupt urban life, which may ironically make less advanced cities more resilient.

Much of the typology applied to the roots of internal conflicts can be applied to serve as sources of city fragility as well: