

# Violence and humanitarian action in urban areas: new challenges, new approaches

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## Abstract

*A number of states are faced with the challenge of ensuring the harmonious development of rapidly expanding cities and of offering a growing population public services worthy of the name in the fields of security, health, and education. That challenge is even more difficult and more pressing because violence may erupt (hunger riots, clashes between territorial gangs or ethnic communities, acts of xenophobic violence directed against migrants, and so on) – violence that does not generally escalate to the point of becoming an armed conflict but that is murderous nevertheless.*

*On the basis of the experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross and of its partners, as well as reports by academic specialists, this article describes the vulnerability of the poorest and of migrants in urban areas. It presents the difficulties with which humanitarian organizations, which are often accustomed to working in rural areas, have to contend. Lastly, it describes innovative responses, from which much can be learned: income-generating micro-projects, aid in the form of cash or vouchers, urban agriculture, and the establishment of violence-prevention or health-promotion programmes to protect those affected by armed violence in disadvantaged areas.*



\* The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Original in French.

Rio de Janeiro, 2010: armed violence rages between drug gangs in the *favelas* and, sporadically, between young dealers and the police. Every year, the toll of this violence is thousands of deaths, summary executions, and ill-treatment, as well as psychological trauma for children in the *favelas* and the ‘asphalt’ alike.<sup>1</sup>

France, 2005: A wave of violent disturbances shakes the Paris suburbs and spreads to two hundred cities throughout the country. Cars are set alight and there are frequent clashes between protesters and the police. The demonstrators in the capital are young boys fired up against the representatives of a centralized state: police, firefighters, teachers. Their marginal situation, the precarious nature of their livelihoods, a sense of being discriminated against, and their difficulties at school have fuelled their revolt. Relegated to suburbs on the periphery of cities, and segregated as a result, they feel deeply resentful.<sup>2</sup>

Cape Town, December 2008: The South African Red Cross Society acquaints us with the armed violence that rages in the Cape Flats slum and its terrible impact on the people living there. Gangs fight against each other in the streets of Cape Flats, and the so-called ‘numbers gangs’ operate in the prisons. A new drug, mandrax, is wreaking havoc, and sexual violence and prostitution thrive against a backdrop of poverty and despair.<sup>3</sup>

These three situations are very different, and all of them call out to humanitarian entities.<sup>4</sup> They have been chosen among so many others (Kabul, Baghdad, Gaza, Port-au-Prince, Grozny, Mogadishu, etc.) for two reasons. First, they are familiar to the author,<sup>5</sup> and second, they illustrate the great diversity of the violence that plagues countries at peace. Armed conflicts proper, in which the ICRC’s urban-based operations are well known, are excluded from the scope of this article.

This article is inspired by problems that cry out for a humanitarian response. But lest the reader draw overly gloomy conclusions, it should be pointed out that not all cities are in crisis and that most of them still have considerable powers of attraction, particularly for young people. Poverty is not necessarily synonymous with violence. Cities are fragmented and full of contrasts, and, while some districts thrive and attract sustainable development, others are neglected by public services. Yet growth is not always unbalanced and solidarity can be found, for instance in the rich fabric of voluntary groups and associations in our inner cities.

1 See Luke Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade: A Case Study of Children in Organised Armed Violence in Rio de Janeiro*, 7Letras, Rio de Janeiro, 2003, pp. 90–91 and 257. ‘Asphalt’ (*asfalto*) is a term used to refer to ‘areas of the city that are not considered to be in the *favela*’. It alludes to the fact that these districts are asphalted, in contrast to the anarchic urban excrescences known as *favelas*.

2 Hugues Lagrange et Marco Oberti (eds), *Émeutes urbaines et protestations: une singularité française*, Nouveaux Débats, Paris, 2006.

3 Steffen Jensen, *Gangs, Politics and Dignity in Cape Town*, James Currey Ltd, Oxford/University of Chicago Press, Chicago/Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2008.

4 In this article, the term ‘humanitarian entities’ is used in the broad sense to include all bodies (whether international, national, or local) that perform acts of humanity in response to the needs of vulnerable individuals or communities, whatever the situation prevailing in the country.

5 The author visited Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and Cape Town to discuss the phenomenon of violence in urban settings with academic and other specialists in the subject.

But the humanitarian's vocation is to tend to those in distress, and that is what this article is about. Its aims are threefold:

- first, to alert the reader to the humanitarian consequences of uncontrolled urban expansion when public authorities do not have the capacity to ensure that all inhabitants of a city can live safely, or to provide them with the minimum services they are entitled to expect (water, electricity, housing, health care, education, etc.);
- second, to share our concern in the face of new and mutating forms of violence in urban areas. This violence has been engendered in part by globalization, which, by intensifying exchanges, has fostered the expansion of trans-national crime. Although cities have been hard hit by armed conflicts throughout their history, nowadays they are often the scenes of a worrisome tangle of violent phenomena that is not generally termed armed conflict in the legal sense but that is murderous nevertheless. These violent phenomena are the focus of this article;
- third, drawing on the experiences, observations, and analysis of the ICRC's delegates in the field, to share some thoughts on the hardship of life in cities for the poorest and the newest arrivals, on the challenges of humanitarian operations in this environment, and on the lessons learned from some innovative projects launched by the ICRC and a number of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

## The city and its relationship with the countryside

Let us begin by exploring the meaning of the word 'urban' and the concept of the city. The two concepts 'city' and 'urban' are often used interchangeably, and there does not appear to be any universal definition of either. Governments use different definitions, which makes it difficult to draw up comparative statistics.<sup>6</sup> Even within a country, geographers, economists, and politicians are not always of the same opinion.

However, there are a number of indicators that serve to define what constitutes a city, among them administrative criteria defining its geographical boundaries; the size or density of the population; the percentage of inhabitants pursuing non-agricultural activities; the way housing is organized; the infrastructure (paved streets, water and cleaning systems, electricity, and so on).<sup>7</sup> A distinction is often made between the city *stricto sensu* and the greater city, which includes suburbs and peripheral areas of continuous habitation, and between what

6 United Nations, Department of Economics and Social Affairs, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2007 Revision Population Database*, New York, 2008, available at: <http://esa.un.org/unup/index.asp?panel=6> (last visited 30 June 2010).

7 *Human Security for an Urban Century: Local Challenges, Global Perspectives*, Humansecurity-cities.org, 2007, p. 10, available at: [http://www.interpeace.org/pdfs/Publications\\_\(Pdf\)/Current\\_Reports/Human\\_Security\\_for\\_an\\_Urban\\_Century.pdf](http://www.interpeace.org/pdfs/Publications_(Pdf)/Current_Reports/Human_Security_for_an_Urban_Century.pdf) (last visited 29 July 2010).

is ‘urban’ and what is ‘peri-urban’, a term used to refer to the urban fringes. Finally, the term ‘urban’ may also refer to a way of life, different from that of the countryside, that is characteristic of inhabited areas stretching over tens or even hundreds of kilometres, in veritable ‘urban archipelagos’.

Furthermore, the urban environment and the countryside are not two distinct environments. There are many forms of exchanges between them. These include migratory, economic, and financial flows, as well as flows of information and natural resources, as illustrated by the examples below:

- there are movements of people into the cities but also outside cities and between them. People move back and forth either seasonally or daily (commuting);
- families spread themselves between the city and the country in order to make the most of both environments. Agricultural produce from the country is brought into the cities to be sold on the markets there;
- city dwellers exchange news on security conditions in the city with the inhabitants of their home villages, and vice versa;
- cities use the adjacent rural areas as repositories for urban waste.

Often, as we have observed in Africa, the countryside changes as a result of urban expansion. Farmers adapt to new opportunities, and peri-urban areas become ruralized as a result of displacement and migration. Incoming groups bring their animals, their farming practices (which they have to adapt to confined spaces), and their way of life into their new homes. As the sociologist Victor Sakagne Tine put it,

We need to free ourselves of any form of ruralist bias or ‘urbano-centric’ vision and rethink the relationship between the city and the country on the basis of an integrated approach that will provide a response to a complex mesh of challenges.<sup>8</sup>

This should reassure humanitarian organizations who may fear that focusing too much attention on the vulnerable and people affected by violence in cities could be prejudicial to humanitarian action in the countryside, where needs might be overlooked.

## Uncontrolled urbanization that calls out to humanitarians

The UN-HABITAT statistics speak for themselves.<sup>9</sup> Since 2008, over half the world’s population has lived in cities. In two decades, city dwellers will account for

8 Victor Sakagne Tine, ‘Urbain et rural autour de la re-création des “écocités”: les expériences de Mboro et de Darou Khoudoss (Sénégal)’, in *ECHOS du COTA*, No. 116, Brussels, September 2007, p. 4, our translation. The example of Mboro in Senegal, in a horticultural area but also close to phosphate mines, is a good example of this type of interconnection.

9 UN-HABITAT, *State of the World’s Cities 2008/2009: Harmonious Cities*, Earthscan, London, 2008, p. 11.

almost 60% of the world's population. This growth is particularly rapid in developing countries: if the projections are correct, more than half the population of Africa (where country dwellers currently make up the majority) will be living in cities by 2050. In Asia, the shift to the city will be even faster, as 70% of the population of China will be living in cities by 2050.

A particularly worrying trend is the growth of shanty towns and slums.<sup>10</sup> In the developing world, one inhabitant in three lives in this type of area. In 2005, 998 million people were living in shanty towns worldwide; this number is expected to rise to 1.4 billion by 2020. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the largest proportion of its population living in shanty towns and slums in urban areas.<sup>11</sup>

The growth of shanty towns is being fuelled by the spectacular population growth in a number of developing countries. Another factor is urban drift brought about by armed conflict, deterioration of the rural environment,<sup>12</sup> or simply the hope of a better life. According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), of the 10.5 million or so people who fall under its mandate, around 50% live in urban environments and one-third in camps.<sup>13</sup> People on the move arrive in cities with few possessions, in search of safety, a job, or assistance from the government or humanitarian organizations. Or, in some cases, they prefer simply to merge into the crowd. In many shanty towns, there is little or no access to drinking water and sanitary facilities. Moreover, shanty-town dwellers often live in very confined spaces, in makeshift accommodation, and without any kind of secure rent contract or title.<sup>14</sup> People are left to fend for themselves in wretched and insalubrious conditions.

Geographical and social disparities within and between cities are potentially explosive. Anyone travelling in South Africa, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, or the Philippines cannot fail to be struck by the contrast between the smart villas, with their swimming pools and tennis courts, and the dilapidated shacks and shelters made of plastic sheeting and corrugated iron with which they stand cheek by jowl. As UN-HABITAT points out, these inequalities are socially discriminating and, in the long term, economically unsustainable – but they are not ineluctable.<sup>15</sup>

Stratification of society foments insecurity, which in turn leads to greater stratification, creating a vicious spiral. In poor districts, some residents seek a form of protection by joining gangs, who fight with one another and come into conflict with the police from time to time; in rich districts, residents surround their houses

10 Mike Davis, *Le pire des mondes possibles: de l'explosion urbaine au bidonville global*, La Découverte, Paris, 2006.

11 UN-HABITAT, *State of the World's Cities 2006/2007: The Millennium Development Goals and Urban Sustainability: 30 Years of Shaping the Habitat Agenda*, Earthscan, London, 2006, p. 18.

12 Erosion or impoverishment of the soil, deforestation, drying up of water sources, damage caused by communication lines designed to bring produce to the market, etc.

13 UNHCR, *2008 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons*, 16 June 2009, p. 2.

14 UN-HABITAT, *State of the World's Cities 2008/2009*, above note 9, p. 92.

15 *Ibid.*, p. xiii. Asian cities on the whole (there are exceptions such as Hong Kong) appear to be characterized by less stark inequalities.

with high walls and even hire guards or private militias. Relatively little pressure is brought to bear on the authorities to provide security throughout the city because the moneyed classes have found other ways to protect themselves from banditry. What is more, there is virtually no interaction between the poor and rich districts and, when there is, it generally takes the form of violence.

Finally, in some cities, there are ‘no-go areas’ into which the police no longer dare to venture to enforce law and order. The people living there are subjected to the iron rule of armed groups who exercise control on their ‘turf’. The residents are stigmatized as a result and very few of them find jobs and social status outside their home districts.

There is therefore much to indicate that, sooner or later, critical situations will arise that will call for responses from humanitarian organizations as well as development-based ones.

## **Cities: theatres of tangled and mutating armed violence**

In ancient times, the city was often viewed as a refuge. Encircled by walls and surrounded by moats, accessible only by means of a drawbridge, many ancient or medieval cities gave the people a sense of security, albeit sometimes a false one.<sup>16</sup> Although today’s cities still seem like havens in a troubled world for people on the move, the reality is much harsher. Cities are exerting an ever greater attraction for armed groups and are the scenes of various manifestations of violence. Often, there are links between the different perpetrators of that violence. Even in countries considered to be at peace, turf and drug gangs may clash with such intensity that the situations they create could almost be categorized as armed conflicts in the legal sense of the word.

### **Organized armed groups in cities and their peripheries**

Cities attract all kinds of armed groups, who generally operate under cover. The concentration of wealth and business opportunities to be found there are a major draw in a globalized economy. Cities offer more consumer goods and better services (health and education) than country areas. They are hubs for information and transport networks. Moreover, acts of armed violence committed in a large city in order to strike terror into the population attract maximum coverage and international attention, particularly if the city is a capital where international media and embassies are located. Finally, the city provides individuals with the possibility of hiding among a dense population<sup>17</sup> – or, alternatively, of getting publicity for themselves as *de facto* participants in a dialogue with the international community.

16 For example, the walls of the old cities of Jerusalem, Dubrovnik, and Carcassonne.

17 *Conflict and Emergencies in Urban Areas*, Conference at Webster University, Geneva, on 30 January 2009.

But let us not jump to the conclusion that the theatre of armed conflicts is shifting massively towards the cities. Armed groups know full well that the government, and the security services in particular, can exercise tighter surveillance in cities, forcing them to operate in small units or even as single individuals. In the countryside or in mountainous regions, they run less risk of detection as the state has to physically control a territory where the population is scattered among villages in order to know what is really going on there.<sup>18</sup>

Should we conclude then that most of tomorrow's armed conflicts will continue to take place mainly in the countryside, between more or less organized entities, and that asymmetric violence will sporadically flare up in cities?<sup>19</sup> The question is worth asking. At all events, we may be sure that frictions in confined and overpopulated spaces can easily give rise to disturbances exacerbated by arms carriers present in the cities.

### A tangled skein of violent acts

Violence takes an impressive range of forms. The list below, which excludes classic armed conflict, presents a number of examples in no particular order.<sup>20</sup> It is not meant to be exhaustive.

- Social and/or political uprisings;
- hunger riots;
- 'turf wars' between gangs;
- xenophobic violence directed against migrants;
- 'identity-based' violence among ethnic or religious communities;
- violence linked to crime: drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, etc.;
- terrorism.

The police do not always have the training and equipment needed to enforce law and order. Sometimes law-enforcement officers make excessive use of force. The same goes for armed militias and community-defence organizations formed to pacify demonstrators in situations where public security measures are inadequate.

Sometimes – not always – there are links between these different forms of violence. First of all, the various armed individuals who commit acts of violence

18 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 133–136.

19 See *ibid.*, p. 38, observing that 'most civil conflicts are fought primarily in rural areas by predominantly peasant armies'. The author points out that, notwithstanding this observation, most studies on violence in civil wars have been carried out by urban intellectuals and therefore show an urban bias.

20 For a representation of the different strata of violence in society, see the World Health Organization (WHO)'s ecological model of violence, which distinguishes violence against the self, interpersonal violence (in the family or community), and collective violence of a social, political, or economic nature. WHO, *World Report on Violence and Health*, Geneva, 2002, p. 7.

may work together to enhance their effectiveness. Some supply weapons, others false papers, and still others information, hiding places, undeclared jobs, or even hit men.

Second, one form of violence may feed another. When immigrants are attacked, the general chaos engendered by the disturbances and their attempts to flee to safety can provide criminal groups with an opportunity to pillage, rape, and even kill. When an armed conflict comes to an end, the fighters' weapons are recycled in neighbouring countries and crime tends to rise. Finally, at a more individual level, group violence may sometimes lead to an increase in domestic violence.

Third, violence is in a constant state of mutation. So-called political violence may merge with common crime: for example, drug trafficking or pillage of natural resources can finance the purchase of weapons or corruption aimed at influencing political events, but it may also buy the fighter a lifestyle that will eclipse his original motivations and fuel a taste for high living. This is not necessarily a typically urban problem. However, the city is the showcase for globalization, whose flows (money, trade, transport, communication, etc.) foster a degree of progress for humankind but also trans-border crime.<sup>21</sup>

Needless to say, the challenging distinction between political violence and violence that is purely criminal in origin plainly complicates the task of humanitarian organizations when it comes to deciding, on the basis of their particular mandates, who should benefit from the resources at their disposal, even though all victims should receive help.

## Peacetime violence approaching the intensity of armed conflict

The intensity of the violence perpetrated by organized armed groups in some countries considered at 'peace' is truly alarming. Clashes between organized armed groups (gangs, drug traffickers, and the like) for the control of economic resources such as the drug and arms trades, can sometimes have a higher death toll than an actual armed conflict. In his work on the 'children of the drug trade', Luke Dowdney asks whether violence in the *favelas* of Rio cannot be compared to an armed conflict: 'On the surface, the similarities are startling: armed factions, with military weapons, controlling territory, people and/or resources within the *favelas* and operating within a command structure.'<sup>22</sup> He also raises the question of the applicability of international humanitarian law to this type of situation in an urban environment. His observations pinpoint a legal dilemma that will be addressed later in this article.

21 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Crime and Instability: Case Studies of Transnational Threats*, February 2010.

22 L. Dowdney, above note 1, p. 10.



## The vulnerability of the poorest and the new arrivals in urban environments

Before looking at the challenges faced by humanitarians in urban environments, let us focus on a simple fact: the poverty of some individuals and communities in these environments and the distress of people uprooted from the countryside and having to survive in unknown territory. The various manifestations of violence described above – gun battles, murders, abductions, sexual abuse, child recruitment, extortion, theft, and so forth – hit these people particularly hard.

As the ICRC agronomist Fabien Pouille<sup>23</sup> has pointed out, it is a fallacy to think that rural areas contain the poorest households. It is true that households in the countryside have lower incomes on average than urban households, but they do not have the same levels of expenditure.<sup>24</sup> Not only is the cost of living higher in the city, but people living in shanty towns sometimes pay more for shelter and services than those living in more prosperous districts. For instance, the rental cost per square metre may be higher in a shanty town than in a residential area. The price of water fluctuates and is subject to the law of supply and demand. According to an article published by the Paris-based *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*,

in 2002 in Nairobi, the water supply ran dry and travelling vendors put up the price of a canister of water fivefold, forcing the poorest to turn to other sources, such as rivers or reservoirs, for water that was often not fit to drink.<sup>25</sup>

On average, according to the ICRC's specialists, poor city dwellers have to spend 60% of their income on food and they depend on cash income to pay for all or most of it. They are therefore particularly vulnerable to events such as a sudden rise in the price of foodstuffs (for example cereals), which are largely imported into countries that produce little themselves. At the same time, however, city dwellers can engage in all sorts of informal activities to make ends meet. In this respect, they have more options than people living in villages.

New arrivals in the cities – asylum seekers, refugees, displaced people, and migrants – do not always have the skills to survive decently in a strange environment. Some may have relatives or members of their respective communities in the city whom they head for, but they rarely have a real support network, even if, in some cases, they do receive aid from voluntary associations. They may have

23 The author would like to thank Fabien Pouille and all the ICRC's agronomists who met in Nairobi, and Nicolas Fleury (who is in charge of the ICRC's micro-finance initiatives), for all their help towards understanding the vulnerability of urban populations, income-generating micro-projects, and urban agriculture.

24 Rural environments differ greatly and the idea that they are always poor is a stereotype. Poverty and opulence can co-exist in the countryside, depending on resources and on how wealth is – or is not – redistributed. Some rural areas generate large incomes, for example where they support large-scale cattle ranching, banana plantations, or industrial coffee, palm-oil, or rubber-processing plants. At the same time, within the same region, different types of community – farmers and herdsman, for example – may live side by side with differing levels of income depending on circumstances.

25 Mathieu Merino, *L'insécurité alimentaire en Afrique subsaharienne*, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Note 02/09, June 2009, p. 5, our translation.

difficulties getting to the right offices to apply for aid, especially where those offices are in districts far from their homes, and they do not always have the documents they need to access benefits to which they are entitled.

Immigrants in an irregular situation are particularly vulnerable. Excluded from the formal job market, they live in fear of being arrested. In many countries, they have no access to food aid or medical care. They are also very anxious not to disclose their identities and sometimes exclude themselves from aid networks. The children may have to work rather than go to school, or they are kept out of school because of their irregular status. Those who are lucky enough to get access to education are often the butt of jibes and suffer real psychological pain.

Local residents are also affected by this situation. Social services are overburdened and the quality of support they provide suffers accordingly. When city authorities, often lacking adequate resources (and sometimes undermined by corruption), are faced with consistent and repeated population increases year after year, how can one expect them to adapt the supply of schools, health structures, energy, drinking water, garbage collection, and transport? The environment deteriorates, in part because the cities are unable to recycle the excess waste they generate. The water supply becomes a major challenge.<sup>26</sup> The employment market is saturated with jobseekers ready to accept any conditions to get some income, and the economy is distorted in the long term as a result. Hence local residents may react with xenophobia and try to turn the new arrivals away or take advantage of their plight. In some cases they may even resort to violence. The poorest of the poor are most vulnerable to these types of abuse.

## Challenges for humanitarians in the urban environment

Three challenges are examined in this section: identifying beneficiaries and their needs; the size and complexity of the problems; and co-ordinating with other entities.

### Identification of beneficiaries and their needs

Needs are assessed in the same way in cities as in rural areas, but on the basis of different indicators. In the countryside, the humanitarian worker will assess livestock and harvests, for example, whereas in a city he or she will try to assess the cost

26 'Difficulties in supplying drinking water will become a major challenge for some mega-cities such as Johannesburg, whose municipal council is currently obliged to take water from over 500 km away. In Bangkok, salt water is starting to seep into the groundwater. Mexico City's foundations are subsiding because the city has drawn too heavily on its reserves of underground water' (our translation). French Government, Ministry of Defence, Strategic Affairs Delegation, *Prospective géostratégique à l'horizon des trente prochaines années*, 2008, p. 164, available at: <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/base-de-medias/documents-telechargeables/das/documents-prospective-de-defense/gt2030-synthese> (last visited 30 June 2010).

of accommodation, food, and services. The cost of services is the least tangible of these indicators and the least objectively verifiable. There is therefore a large margin of error when it comes to assessing the degree of poverty and distress of a household or an individual.

A combination of factors makes identifying beneficiaries a complex matter. The first difficulty is the very mass of people in need. In chronically poor city communities, where distress is widely shared, how is the aid worker to identify those households or individuals he or she should assist (on the basis of the organization's mandate)? How can he or she identify the most vulnerable people, whose plight is so acute that it reaches a tipping point beyond which it turns into a crisis situation?

Individual mobility is the second challenge. People may be forced to move to another part of the city in search of security. They may also move because of better economic prospects in another district or city, or simply because they work two or more jobs in different parts of the city. Aid workers therefore have to be very careful, as they may overlook people in difficulty or register the same person more than once.

Some potential beneficiaries – for example, illegal migrants who fear forced expulsion or arrest – may choose to hide. Drawing attention to them by registering them for aid programmes may place them in danger. In contrast, in a village, everyone generally knows everyone else's business. Finally, people in cities know one another less well than in the country, where a local community leader (the mayor, the vet, a religious leader) can point out to humanitarian workers the households in difficulty and draw up a list that they can then verify.

It is always a delicate matter to make a choice between beneficiaries in emergencies. A humanitarian entity cannot normally assist the entire population of a large city, and if it organizes distributions of aid using trucks, great care must be taken to keep control of the situation.

## The size and complexity of the problems needing a response

The notion that aid operations are always more complex in cities than in rural areas is a myth. First of all, the population density is an advantage. Precisely because people live close together, one operation can have an impact on a large number of beneficiaries. One ICRC delegate told me that feeding thousands of people every day in Sarajevo seemed to him less of a challenge than doing the same in isolated villages in conflict zones in Africa. Second, in cities services are generally available and often of a good standard. Caring for the wounded and sick is easier in cities because there are normally hospitals (provided that they are accessible). Finally, there are more voluntary associations in cities than in the country and these can provide support and useful information – although the grass-roots communities often have only a partial overview of vulnerable people in their midst. They may know the residents of their district but not those of the neighbouring districts, or they may know only their groups of concern, such as orphans or the elderly people who attend their places of worship.

The real challenges are at another level:

- It is often necessary to work on systems (the water supply, for example). The bigger the beneficiary population, the greater the risks, so one mistake can have fatal consequences for thousands of people.
- The infrastructure, processes, and systems are complex and interlinked, and mastering them requires expertise that is not always available.
- More concretely still, the built-up nature of the urban environment and the scale of the programmes poses logistical problems. After a major natural disaster such as an earthquake, removing rubble and debris is a huge challenge. The scale of the work involved may necessitate logistical support from other sources, for example local haulage companies. This is something humanitarian entities are not always used to.

### Co-ordination with other entities

In an interesting article summing up the proceedings of a task force within an Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) working group, Roger Zetter and George Deikun note that there may be ‘governance gaps’ in urban environments: ‘Urban government staff may have been affected by natural disasters or fled armed conflict or been implicated in urban violence. Vital administrative resources such as land registers, maps and office equipment may have been destroyed’.<sup>27</sup> In some circumstances it may be difficult to find local partners. They may simply not exist or they may have too few resources.

Nevertheless, barring exceptional circumstances, partnerships will be necessary if only because of the scale of the needs involved. An organization must be open to entering into partnerships in a participative spirit with local and municipal authorities, other humanitarian, development, and human rights organizations, the private sector, academic circles, and religious and other associations. The 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent<sup>28</sup> recommended this approach and encouraged all the components of the Movement (ICRC, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and their International Federation), as well as the states, to think and act in a mutually supportive way. The important role of grass-roots organizations – which are very familiar with their environments, can quickly identify signs of crisis, and cope on a day-to-day basis

27 Roger Zetter and George Deikun, ‘Meeting humanitarian challenges in urban areas’, in *Forced Migration Review*, No. 34, February 2010, p. 6. This task force, entitled ‘Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas’ (MHCUA), in whose work the author participated, works under the direction of UN-HABITAT.

28 ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *The Need for Collaborative Action and Partnerships Between States, the Components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Other Stakeholders in Addressing Humanitarian Challenges of Common Concern (Objective 1)*, background document available at: [http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/30-international-conference-working-documents-121007/\\$File/30IC\\_5-1\\_Obj1\\_Challenges\\_Background\\_ENG\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/30-international-conference-working-documents-121007/$File/30IC_5-1_Obj1_Challenges_Background_ENG_FINAL.pdf) (last visited 30 June 2010).

with problems calling for humanitarian responses in urban environments – is now fully recognized.

Once the need for partnerships has been established, the next step is to identify the challenges. I shall examine two here. The first concerns co-ordination, which necessarily includes the exchange of information and experiences, strategies for handing over programmes to partners, and sharing training practices in technical fields (livestock breeding, agriculture, nutrition, water, shelter, etc.). This may be difficult because different organizations have different mandates, sources of financing, policies, cultures, and time horizons. The second is the dividing line between emergency and development aid that is still clearly present in people's minds, including those of the donors, even though it was demonstrated long ago that these forms of aid are not always sequential and need to be better linked.

## **Aid in urban environments: respecting the dignity of the very poor**

The ICRC's experience, often drawn from countries in transition from armed conflict to peace,<sup>29</sup> brings to light the potential of three original modes of action in urban areas. These are income-generating micro-projects, aid in the form of cash or vouchers, and urban agriculture, all designed to treat beneficiaries with exemplary respect.

### **Income-generating micro-projects**

Classic response mechanisms geared to rural areas are not always ideal for use in cities. In the country, 80% of the population depend on farming for their livelihood and their standard of living can be improved by means of an agronomy project (for example, construction of greenhouses for cultivating vegetables) or work on the water supply (rehabilitation of irrigation channels or wells). In cities, however, in view of the diversity of the residents' occupations, an approach based on a single economic sector is not sufficient.

Provided that the local economy is not too hard hit, there is therefore a growing interest in micro-economic initiatives limited in time and aimed at boosting the income-generating power of households and whole communities. The ICRC has launched programmes of this type in Belgrade, in towns in Chechnya, and in northern Iraq (Erbil, Sulaymaniyah).<sup>30</sup> These are specifically crafted production initiatives that focus on the needs of the beneficiary household.

29 Marion Harroff-Tavel, 'Do wars ever end? The work of the International Committee of the Red Cross when the guns fall silent', in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 85, No. 851, September 2003.

30 ICRC, *Micro-economic Initiatives Handbook*, Geneva, July 2009, available at: [http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0968/\\$File/ICRC\\_002\\_0968.PDF](http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0968/$File/ICRC_002_0968.PDF) (last visited 30 June 2010).

For example, two carpenters might have different expectations: one would like technical assistance and tools while the other would like training. ICRC delegates talk to each beneficiary about his or her needs and the type of support that would enable him or her to take up a commercial activity again. They assess existing resources and tailor the support to the beneficiary's needs. That support may be in kind or in cash, and payments may be made through financial institutions (bank or post office). The ICRC monitors the individual project for six months and, where necessary, provides the expertise or technical help needed for its success (for example book-keeping). In other words, a plumber, carpenter, or mason should be able to take up an income-generating trade once more.

One stumbling block is the reluctance of some humanitarian workers to implement programmes of this kind. It is true that micro-economic initiatives reach only a limited number of households and require monitoring. Also, they are not highly visible. Nevertheless, their great advantage is that they enable households to meet their needs by their own efforts in a long-term perspective and to overcome the feeling of being 'assisted'. Moreover, with such specifically designed initiatives, aid workers can be very precise in selecting beneficiaries. In Erbil, the ICRC has been helping disabled people, while in central and southern Iraq it has provided this type of support for women living alone. Such made-to-measure support can also be provided by National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

### Aid in cash or vouchers

Humanitarian organizations generally provide aid in kind to replace what people have lost or to meet their needs. However, cash transfers have several advantages.<sup>31</sup> Beneficiaries can obtain the goods and services of their choice directly on local markets. Humanitarian responses along these lines can often be organized more quickly than distributions of aid – with which they can be combined. Finally, in cities, given the population density, distributing humanitarian aid in the form of goods can trigger acts of violence or even riots when people reach a critical state of distress.<sup>32</sup>

One form of cash transfer is the voucher system. In the West Bank and Bogotá, the ICRC has distributed 'urban vouchers' to beneficiaries who could then obtain the products they needed in selected stores. This system is more cumbersome to manage than cash donations, because the shops have to agree to keep separate accounts and are subsequently reimbursed by the ICRC.

31 ICRC and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Guidelines for Cash Transfer Programming*, 2007, available at: <http://www.ifrc.org/docs/pubs/disasters/cash-guidelines-en.pdf> (last visited 30 June 2010).

32 It is easier to make the choice of assisting only some villages in rural areas, where those villages are scattered over a wide area, than to restrict oneself to helping one district or a group of streets in a city, where the population is dense and dividing lines are hard to draw.

## Urban agriculture

The extreme poverty described above, which affects a large portion of the urban population, has already encouraged some city dwellers to become involved in urban agriculture. Aid workers coming in from outside have much to learn from them.

The space available for cultivating crops in urban areas is quite small, so only certain types of farming are viable – for example, vegetable patches, mushroom production, animal husbandry, and fish farming. As we were able to observe in Nairobi, families who farm in cities and their outskirts are extremely ingenious. They exploit every bit of land between the houses, build small gardens or chicken coops on several levels, and fill plastic bags with earth and make holes in them so that the plants can grow in a vertical plane. Some people sort waste to recover plastic for industrial use, paper and cardboard to make heating bricks, and organic waste for use as fertilizer. ICRC agronomists estimate that between 15% and 20% of the food produced in the world comes from urban areas.<sup>33</sup>

Developing urban agriculture is worthwhile for several reasons. It can be practised by all socio-economic strata dwelling in cities, each with the level of financial investment it can afford. Growing crops enables the most disadvantaged city dwellers and newly arrived migrants to improve both the quantity and quality of their diet. Agriculture provides jobs for women and young people (who sell fresh animal fodder, for example). Several women interviewed expressed their pleasure and pride in cultivating the soil. Even though it is hard work, it reminds them of life in their native villages and allows them to keep young children with them and safer from the dangers of the street. Finally, it is worth pointing out that urban agriculture protects the environment: it helps towards recycling of waste and has a positive impact on a city's microclimate.

So what are the challenges of urban agriculture? Some concern the political sphere, and others the city dwellers who take to farming. Politicians and government technical departments are often sceptical and need to be convinced, by observation and research, that urban agriculture is worthwhile and should be authorized. To convince them, it is necessary to gather more information and provide answers to some fundamental questions. For example, does urban agriculture involve any health risks? If so, what are they and how can they be prevented? And what standards must be met in terms of animal husbandry and waste management? Some have observed that those who practise agriculture on the urban fringes often lack resources to cultivate the soil and resort to growing things in marshy or insalubrious zones. Moreover, the presence of animals in densely populated areas could be a factor in propagating diseases. If problems of that nature were to arise, it would not be long before the population began looking for scapegoats, and migrants are often treated as the 'usual suspects'. To meet these

33 2009 *Agro workshop: food production in urban and peri-urban areas*, Nairobi, 28 September–2 October 2009. Seminar organized by Fabien Pouille and Bruno Mesureur, agronomists, in Geneva and Nairobi.

challenges, humanitarian organizations can help to raise awareness of the need for legislation and guidelines from the government's technical departments to ensure that agriculture and animal husbandry as practised by city dwellers comply with the law and take place within a pre-established framework. These organizations may also remind the authorities that there are already technical solutions to some of the problems that they perceive.

The other main challenge is to help those practising urban agriculture to overcome the hurdles they encounter. These include uncertainty over land title and access to markets. Within the city, land is at a premium. Disputes are likely to break out when several people claim title to the same land on the basis of differing legal regimes. City dwellers are also afraid to farm on land they are in danger of being evicted from. Cultivated land that has become profitable may be coveted and even appropriated by members of the elite, or by soldiers as a reward for having 'fought for' its occupants. At the same time, in cities affected by conflict or in post-conflict situations, if the various stages of the food system – production, transport, and access to markets – have been affected, bringing produce to market will be a hit-and-miss affair. With the prudence and circumspection necessitated by the political nature of some of these questions, a humanitarian organization can draw the attention of the parties to the conflict or of the relevant authorities to the impact of some of these problems and the need for a humanitarian response.

## Respecting the individual's rights: the challenge of protection<sup>34</sup>

As we have seen, urban violence poses specific problems. So what of the humanitarian response? According to ICRC delegates, in terms of methodology, the challenges of working to ensure that the individual's rights are respected in cities are not fundamentally different from those encountered in the countryside. Humanitarian workers go about the task in the same way: they collect information about depredations committed; they determine whether the acts concerned were violations of the relevant international law; then they make confidential representations to the *de jure* or *de facto* authorities, urging that the violations identified be stopped; finally, they continue to monitor the situation of the people to be protected. The guidelines issued to delegates make no distinction between rural and urban areas. When it comes to applying these guidelines, it might be said at most that it is easier to obtain good quality information and verify it in urban areas – because the people affected live in close proximity to one another and local associations can help out – than in remote villages where rumours sometimes circulate and need to be corroborated. Perhaps specific tools for urban areas would be

34 Protection covers all activities whose purpose is to ensure that an individual's rights are fully respected, in keeping with the spirit and the letter of the relevant bodies of law, particularly human rights law, international humanitarian law, and refugee law.



useful. This question is currently being explored by the IASC Task force on 'Meeting humanitarian challenges in urban areas' referred to above.<sup>35</sup>

## A pilot project

One ICRC experience in a country at peace, namely Brazil, is worth mentioning here. The ICRC has launched a pilot project in Rio de Janeiro. The aim of the project, which has been planned over five years, is to protect the most vulnerable people affected by violence, namely the communities who live in seven *favelas* containing over 600,000 inhabitants, with a particular focus on youth and the prison population – which is an essential component of the armed violence dynamic. The ICRC operates in the poorest sectors of these *favelas*, which are not easily accessed by state services and where the inhabitants are in precarious and sometimes illegal situations. By means of a participative approach in which residents are encouraged to play a role in some programmes (for example, promoting health), the ICRC hopes to develop capacities within these communities to protect themselves from the humanitarian consequences of violence. The aim is that they should be able to run their own affairs and gain access to public services and non-governmental organizations who can help them in the longer term.

The first question that comes to mind is why the ICRC is operating in a country at peace. Perhaps the answer is that, precisely because the ICRC's mandate and primary interest in armed conflict are so clear, it can afford to explore situations on the periphery of its mandate where it can offer its services on the basis of its right of humanitarian initiative, recognized by all.<sup>36</sup> While remaining within the framework drawn for it by the international community, the ICRC would be failing to live up to its responsibilities if it were not to attempt to understand how better to prepare for the challenges of tomorrow. In doing so, it has to establish criteria by which to gauge whether or not it should try to work in these situations. First to come to mind are the existence of organised armed groups who regularly clash with other armed groups or forces, the number of people affected, the seriousness of the situation in terms of humanitarian need, and the specific skills and operational advantages of an impartial, independent and neutral organization like the ICRC. Forecasts based on the emergence of chronic, sustained and asymmetrical armed violence in urban areas should encourage the organization to consider to what extent its experience in armed conflicts, its identity and *modus operandi* could be useful in situations that are sometimes analogous to such conflicts.

35 See above note 27.

36 According to the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, adopted by the 25th International Conference of the Red Cross at Geneva in 1986, amended in 1951 and 2006, Art. 5, paras. 3 and 2(d), adopted by an International Conference in which the states took part, 'The International Committee may take any humanitarian initiative which comes within its role as a specifically neutral and independent institution and intermediary, and may consider any question requiring examination by such an institution'. It must also endeavour to ensure protection of and assistance to victims of what the Statutes call 'internal strife' and its 'direct results'.

## The first crop of lessons learned

On the basis of the ICRC's experiences and observations in cities with high levels of armed violence connected to drug and territorial gangs in countries at peace, particularly in Latin and Central America, we can identify seven main lessons so far:

- It is probably presumptuous to try to tackle protection of the inhabitants directly and immediately. In order to work in dangerous environments, an organization needs to gain acceptance gradually, by meeting people's needs through visible assistance operations (health, first aid, water, hygiene, wastewater treatment, education, etc.) that they can appreciate, and that make the organization better known in the community. The armed factions, too, have to be well disposed towards structural programmes of this type. In reality, they fear outside observers and will not necessarily see the point of operations conducted by outside humanitarian organizations when they themselves have the means to make humanitarian gestures that will win them sympathy. Assistance programmes should also make it possible, on the basis of a pre-defined legal framework, to lessen people's exposure to the risk of abuse and violence within a community.
- As the ICRC expert Pierre Gentile explains,<sup>37</sup> protection concerns and assistance programmes cannot be introduced abruptly. Sometimes it is necessary to begin by working to protect medical facilities and staff before going on to address more sensitive questions such as the sources of youth radicalization, summary executions, and disappearances. Humanitarian workers have to build trust and are then able to make gradual connections between assistance and protection activities that will be measured by the yardstick of that trust. The ICRC also has to be transparent about the type of activities it wants to develop.
- The sort of dialogue that humanitarian workers will engage in with armed factions in urban areas will depend on their estimation of who those factions are. The dividing line between political and criminal groups is not always clear, as we have seen. Delinquents may put forward political demands in order to gain political leverage and access to power; political parties may engage in criminal activities; and armed factions may use criminal means to finance their so-called political activities. Collusion between terrorism and organized crime is often described as a many-faceted phenomenon.<sup>38</sup>

However, there is a difference between groups that challenge the authority of a state and those whose aim is to conduct their money-making activities without interference. With the former, a dialogue based on rules aimed at reducing armed violence within communities can be envisaged. With the latter,

37 Pierre Gentile is head of the Civilian Population Unit at the ICRC. The source of these ideas is an ICRC internal document.

38 Dipak K. Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism and Political Violence: The Life Cycle of Birth, Growth, Transformation, and Demise*, Routledge, London and New York, 2008, p. 149.

- for whom armed violence is a means of intimidation to protect money-making activities, this type of dialogue has its limits. It will therefore be necessary to find a basis for exchanges on questions the group can identify as relevant to its needs or sees as worth considering as a means of strengthening its ties with the community – for example, protection of medical facilities and staff or infrastructure vital to that community. The aim of contact with such groups, be it direct or through an intermediary, may be limited to an attempt to bolster the security of humanitarian operations themselves.
- Understanding the link between the situation in places of detention and the violence perpetrated outside them could help to clarify the role that inmates may be playing in what is happening in the streets. The ICRC's humanitarian work in prisons could help the organization to make itself known to the imprisoned leaders of armed groups who are often in contact with their networks outside. Such contacts could help to improve security for humanitarian operations.
  - It is advisable to abstain from making public judgements that may jeopardize the humanitarian operation in view. Two factors to be borne in mind are fears on the part of the authorities that contacts between humanitarian organizations and armed factions that they consider criminal may give those factions some legitimacy, and the susceptibility of arms bearers themselves who intend to be respected. Whenever possible, reference should be made to the purely humanitarian purpose of any impartial and apolitical operation designed to help victims of armed violence.
  - It is necessary to work in networks with the affected communities and civil society. In rural areas, the ICRC works mainly with community representatives (such as elders), but in urban areas it encounters a less familiar, but large, associative landscape. When Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies have roots in these communities, they can be very valuable partners.
  - Finally, security remains the touchstone of any humanitarian operation. Dialogue with official security forces on operational matters is familiar territory to the ICRC, but approaching territorial gangs calls for great caution. The ICRC is still in the learning phase when it comes to contacts with these groups, whom it generally approaches through an intermediary. In the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, security measures include notification of movements, use of community radio stations, direct and indirect contact with armed factions, and dialogue with political circles.

## A legal dilemma

Armed urban violence between groups that are generally considered as criminal (drug dealers, territorial gangs, mafia-type groups, etc.), or between those groups and government forces or private militias, raises some complex legal (and political) problems. This is particularly the case when that fighting is between groups engaged in a collective confrontation of major intensity, which testifies to a high

degree of organization. Such organization may be measured in terms of the groups' ability to train and equip armed men, carry out military operations, give orders, or even to occupy and defend territories from which they engage in illegal activities. From a legal perspective, what are the key issues involved in such situations?

First, assuming that the situation may be defined as an armed conflict, is international humanitarian law, which governs the conduct of hostilities, appropriate to deal with that type of confrontation? Let us not forget that, in the contexts concerned, the weapons bearers are often adolescents involved in all kinds of criminal dealings, and the police force (which is in charge of maintaining law and order) is more frequently involved than the armed forces. The drafters of the Geneva Conventions at the end of World War II and of the Additional Protocols after the period of decolonization did not have conflicts of this kind in mind.

Second, if it is doubtful whether the fighting can be defined as an armed conflict, is it wise to insist on the implementation of international humanitarian law, which would mean a lower level of legal protection for the civilian populations affected by the situation? The provisions of human rights law governing the use of force apply in any case to a situation of urban violence in countries at peace.<sup>39</sup>

## Integration of entire communities in efforts to prevent violence

As Mawanda Shaban, a member of the Youth Commission of the Uganda Red Cross Society, put it,

of course, it is a fact that when you talk about violence, even when you talk about migration, you cannot separate it from the youth. But I would like to look, in thirty seconds, at what causes this violence. And the major challenge is definitely lack of integration within the society.<sup>40</sup>

Not only is violence not the preserve of the young – they are often perpetrators but they are also often the victims – but integration of young people, women, and different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups into the community is a very effective way of preventing violence.

So how do we get there? Two innovative projects in urban environments are worthy of mention.<sup>41</sup> A number of National Societies in Central America and the Caribbean,<sup>42</sup> together with the Spanish Red Cross, have set up a project to prevent youth violence in eleven urban and suburban municipalities (classified as 'red zones') in that region of the Americas. It is aimed at young people between the

39 Under human rights law, the use of lethal force must meet the criterion of strict necessity. International humanitarian law, by contrast, allows such force in a far broader range of circumstances.

40 *Report of the 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent*, prepared by the ICRC and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva, 2007, p. 212.

41 See also Michele Poretti, 'Preventing children from joining armed groups', in *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2009, pp. 121–141, an article written by an ICRC adviser in his personal capacity.

42 Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Dominican Republic, and Haiti.

ages of 14 and 21 who do not take an active part in violence but who are on the point of joining violent structures (such as territorial gangs or *maras*). Although the project uses recreational activities (sports and urban pop art – hip hop, graffiti, street theatre) to attract their attention, the aim is not so much to occupy them as to create spaces where they can escape segregation, develop a feeling of belonging to a community, and exert their capacity for leadership in positive projects involving other young people from that community. The South African Red Cross has also launched a violence-prevention programme based on sport – in this case football – in the townships of Gauteng province.<sup>43</sup> Football is a sport that fosters integration because it is played by all social classes. Moreover, it does not require a financial investment on the part of the players and it generates enormous enthusiasm.

What lessons do the National Societies draw from these initiatives?<sup>44</sup> In Central America and the Caribbean, violence is a dynamic and changing reality so it is necessary to adapt the selection criteria for beneficiaries. Because the idea is not rehabilitation but prevention, none of the young people involved should be associated with a particular *mara* or territorial gang. Once the target groups have been chosen, the fund-raising process has to be shared with them to avoid disappointment linked to unrealistic expectations. When the project gets under way, it is helpful to start working with small groups in which everyone starts by speaking as an individual, then gradually begins to feel like a part of a whole. Programmes like this have to be designed in partnership so as to improve the perception that the media and public institutions have of young people.<sup>45</sup> The South African Red Cross stressed the importance of regular meetings with community representatives so that they take ownership of the project, and of regular exchanges with the volunteers in order to keep up their motivation. Finally, in the Americas and Africa alike, the fundamental principles of the International Movement of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent,<sup>46</sup> through the confidence they inspire, help to integrate volunteers from all sorts of backgrounds.

## Conclusion

The rapid and anarchic urbanization of our planet, the widening chasm between rich areas and slums, widespread violence and lawlessness in areas neglected by

43 Launched in 2007 with financial support from the ICRC delegation in Pretoria, this project promotes a culture of tolerance, self-discipline, and personal development through sport. In 2009, 140 schools and 48 youth clubs took part in this initiative.

44 The descriptions of these projects and the lessons learned are based on replies from National Societies to a questionnaire sent to them by the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as part of the preparation for a workshop on promotion of respect for diversity and non-discrimination, held in Nairobi in 2009.

45 These groups tend to stigmatize the behaviour of young people and call for stronger measures ('a firm hand'), sometimes for political ends (for example, to attract votes before an election).

46 I.e. humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.

public services, inflows of refugees, displaced people, and migrants into the cities, and the pull of cities for armed groups all warrant attention from humanitarian organizations and development agencies alike. These problems need not only long-term responses but also preventive initiatives involving a cross-section of professionals. Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, lawyers, politicians, urban planners, geographers, and historians need to pool their resources to meet these new challenges.

States cannot hope to master violence in cities purely by means of security measures (especially when the security forces are ill-equipped, underpaid, and, in some cases, threatened by corruption). It is time to move the focus of the debate away from law-enforcement strategies<sup>47</sup> and give more thought to the underlying causes of the problems we observe: poverty, unemployment, the inability of the poorest members of society to move in search of better fortunes, lack of access to education and failure at school, and the breakdown of family life and the erosion of parental authority. Marginalized young people in troubled urban communities have a need for belonging and respect that society does not meet but that territorial gangs or other armed factions may appear to provide. In a book reflecting the debate in France around violence, the sociologist and historian Laurent Mucchielli makes practical suggestions: focus on the fight against racism; design local neighbourhood structures to bring all city dwellers back into the public sphere; and, as regards delinquency, ‘talk about it differently and try to learn more about it’,<sup>48</sup> because what we know is still rudimentary. We must listen to what those concerned have to say, wherever they are in the picture.

I shall leave the last word to Mucchielli, who expresses the need to go beyond statistical forecasts and the fear of tomorrow and focus once more on the human condition: ‘The changing nature of delinquent behaviour is a distress signal that should prompt us to wonder, not about the signal itself, but about the distress of which it is an expression’,<sup>49</sup> a distress that, when it is expressed through violence, leaves behind it broken bodies and broken lives.

47 Yves Pedrazzini, *La violence des villes*, Enjeux Planète, Paris, 2005.

48 Laurent Mucchielli, *Violences et insécurité: fantasmes et réalités dans le débat français*, Éditions La Découverte et Syros, Paris, 2002, p. 139, our translation.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 140, our translation.