

Understanding the tipping point of urban conflict

Violence, cities and poverty reduction in the developing world

The case of Dili, Timor-Leste

Policy Brief

1.0 Introduction

In April 2006, Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, experienced a major episode of collective violence when a dispute over unequal treatment within the armed forces escalated and led to the death of dozens, the destruction of around 2,000 houses, and the displacement of 150,000 people. Such outbreaks of collective violence give credence to perceptions that uncontrolled urbanisation correlates with violence. Not only is this link empirically contestable, but the specific dynamics of urban violence, when it does occur, generally remains under-researched, despite the fact that it is an issue that is not about to go away. Already in 2008, the world's urban population passed the 50% mark, and by 2050, around two-thirds of all people on this planet – projected at 9 billion – are likely to be residing in urban centres. Taking a cue from Jane Jacob's depiction of cities as "complex yet organised", our study of Dili – one of the four cases of the Urban Tipping Point (UTP) project – has sought to unpack the dynamics in which societal tensions and interpersonal conflict can "tip" into acute levels of collective violence. These dynamics are elaborated in the project by applying the lens of the "urban tipping process".

Underlying this conceptual framework is a broad understanding of **conflict** that encompasses societal tensions resulting from aspirations of power and authority by political leaders, business entrepreneurs, the security sector and a variety of societal actors and stakeholders in the public realm. Such conflict

is an ever-present phenomenon in society, and does not necessarily have to entail or result in violence. This distinction between conflict and violence is coupled with a focus on **fault lines** (empirically observed or subjectively perceived societal divisions along which the tensions among individuals and groups are structured and interests are defined), and **conflict drivers** (i.e. imminent conditions that have the potential of triggering social unrest, oppression, or open confrontation). The presence, and interaction, of fault lines and conflict drivers creates an environment in which the "thresholds" of individuals to engage in usually sanctioned violence potentially decrease.

Together, these fault lines and conflict drivers are crucial elements conditioning the **context** which leads to societal tensions and interpersonal conflict tipping into large-scale collective violence. The conflict tipping point is usually characterised by an event that takes place within this context and is brought about by certain **key actors**: these include the *first-movers* (the individuals to first engage in violence); *connectors* (those individuals who know a lot of other individuals in the group, and perhaps even outside it, and are likely to influence others to follow the lead of the first movers); the *experts* (individuals who are seen to be especially qualified for the task at hand); and *charismatic personalities* (individuals who are likely to convince a large number of individuals to behave in a certain way).

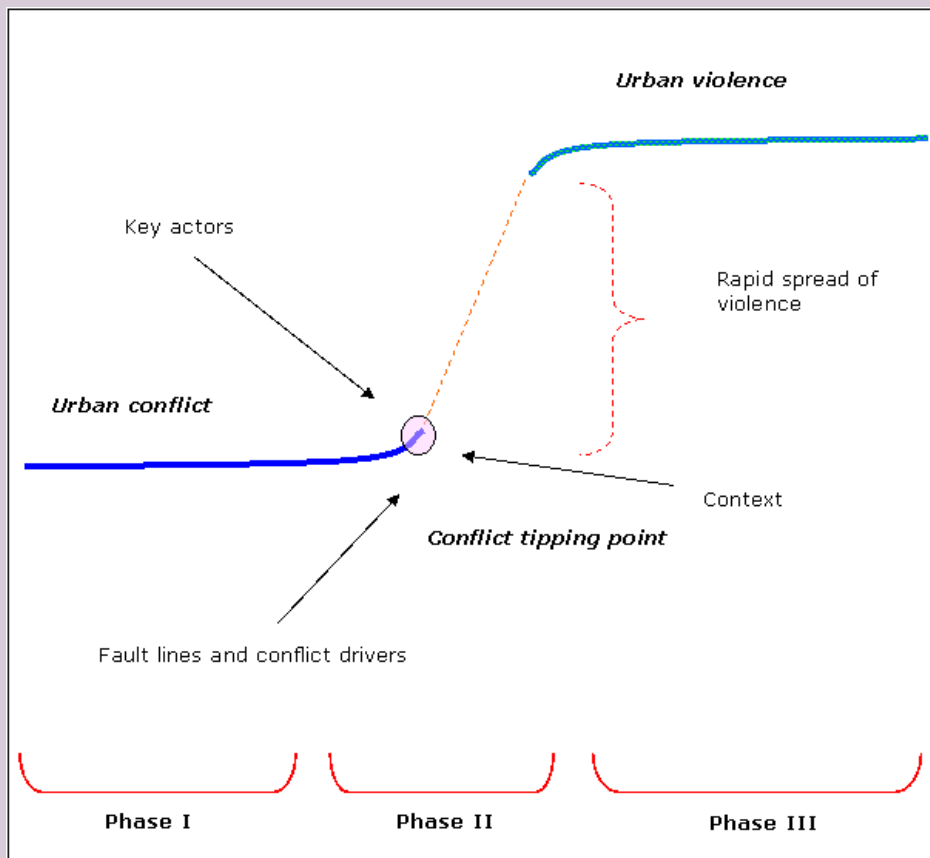
Without wishing to imply temporal determinism, a useful way to depict the **urban tipping process** diagrammatically is by

subdividing it into three phases. Phase I is marked by the presence of conflict and societal tensions in the urban environment. Conflict at this stage is relatively stable, in the sense that it is confined to (albeit potentially high levels of) interpersonal violence, and can be analysed by drawing on the fault lines in the urban and national environments. Phase II is the “conflict tipping point”: this is where conflict drivers interact with the fault lines and together increase the magnitude of the conflict, causing it to spread through society and bring about collective violence. Phase III is characterised by a change in the urban environment itself. Here the effects of collective violence during the tipping point can be drawn upon to shed light on the current status quo.

Methodologically, the conceptualisation of the urban environment as complex yet organised requires a more iterative approach to understanding the “onset of”, or “tipping into”, collective violence. The research for the Dili

study was thus conducted by means of a participatory approach that utilised a basic version of “grounded theory”, or the sequential reformulation of tentative arguments. Rather than using theory to develop a set of hypotheses that are then tested by means of empirical analysis, the work was conducted “backwards” by first collecting information and then inductively reorganising it into categories, patterns, themes, and narratives. As the fieldwork progressed, the researchers continuously refined the emerging narratives and reoccurring themes in a series of reflective feedback loops. In Dili, the aim of the participatory approach was not just to get a sense of how different stakeholders experienced the Crisis, but also to see how individuals from various backgrounds interpreted the violence and its causes almost six years on. Key questions included whether the public authorities had learned any lessons from the Crisis, whether the underlying fault lines had been addressed, and whether the violence of 2006 could be repeated.

Figure 1: The Urban Tipping Process



2.0 Understanding the Crisis of 2006-07

Most existing analyses of the Crisis of 2006-07 point to the presence of large numbers of unemployed youths as the main reason for the violence. The research conducted sought to develop a more context-sensitive account of the events of the 2006-07 Crisis, in particular tracing the different fault lines, conflict drivers, and multiple actors involved, and situating their articulation more broadly within the urban complexities of the city, which generally tend to be ignored, insofar as Dili is often simply treated as one of the country's 13 districts, despite the fact that with some 250,000 inhabitants it is by far Timor-Leste's biggest settlement, with around one quarter of the country's people living there.

The main **fault lines** in Dili present at the time of the 2006-07 Crisis included a stark discrepancy between traditional forms of authority and the values of liberal democracy, a discursive distinction between so-called "easterners" and "westerners", and the disembedded nature – in terms of socio-economic development – of the urban space within which the majority of Dili's population lives. The **conflict drivers** identified include social jealousy, historical problems among the political elite, high youth unemployment, land insecurity, and fragmentation in the security sector. By mapping onto the fault lines described, these conflict drivers provided the context in which key actors could exploit individual and group interests and pit them against each other.

The **first movers** in the 2006-07 Crisis were a group of army petitioners who voiced their discontent to their superiors – the argument being that personnel from the western part of the country were being discriminated against. The dismissal of the petitioners from the East Timorese armed forces (F-FDTL) led to the staging of protests in front of the Governmental Palace in April 2006. Another set of first movers were the youths and youth groups that first engaged in violence during the protests and set off a chain reaction that led to property destruction and displacement of residents throughout much of the city.

The spread of violence was made possible by the presence and role of **connectors** – based in Timor-Leste on the kinship nature of social interaction as stipulated by traditional custom (*lisan*). Primary loyalty in East Timorese society is to one's extended family network or clan that traces its origin back to a sacred house (*uma lulik*). These kinship ties not only give individuals migrating to Dili access to a social network, but it also allows for rapid organisation of that network in times of insecurity. Individuals and groups coming from the same district thus organised and sought to protect themselves during the breakdown of social order that characterised the Crisis, a process which led to a fragmentation of urban space in the city.

A range of **experts** were involved in the violence. First, there exist a large number of individuals who had ties to the resistance movement but in the post-independence environment faced social and political exclusion. Broadly known as "the veterans", these individuals banded together to form the various clandestine and ritual arts groups that can be found in Dili. The second set of experts falls under the heading of martial arts groups, many of which can also be traced back to the Indonesian period. The third type of experts can best be described as street-corner gangs. These groups are community-oriented and often formed as a response to rivalries between and among the first two types. The proliferation of such groups clearly fuelled the violence that spread throughout the city.

At the same time, however, our research suggests that these various martial and ritual arts groups and street-corner gangs were not directly involved in the organisation of violence. Rather, their involvement was very much instrumentalised, and a function of rivalry within the East Timorese political elite, including in particular certain **charismatic personalities** enjoying almost a cult-like following among the population. These revived a traditional discourse about *lorosae* and *loromonu* (easterners and westerners), in order to foster a context of polarisation within

which different actors could be more easily mobilised and roused to violence.

This process was also facilitated by a number of important features that make Dili different from the rest of Timor-Leste:

(1) *Heterogeneous population.* Being the centre of political and economic development, Dili attracts migrants from all the other 12 districts – making it a microcosm representing numerous East Timorese sub-cultures and its 37 languages. Yet the heterogeneity also transposes family feuds, tribal tensions and a variety of disputes onto the city, where closer proximity contributes to the intensity with which they are played out.

(2) *Weak traditional beliefs.* For the majority of East Timorese, traditional beliefs (*lisan*) continue to structure daily life – indeed, the mechanisms through which norms and rules stipulated by *lisan* are implemented are central to, and are usually the first point of call for solving, family disputes or communal tensions. In Dili, however, these mechanisms share an uneasy co-existence with liberal-democratic conceptions of justice and the rule of law.

(3) *Land insecurity.* A central aspect of *lisan* is the emphasis on so-called “sacred houses” (*uma lulik*), which not only structure interpersonal relations within and between families and tribes, but also outline land ownership and use. In Dili these houses are largely absent, with residents maintaining allegiance to their sacred house in the district of origin. Coupled with competing land titles stemming from the Portuguese and Indonesian periods, as well as a lack of legislation, land insecurity constitutes one of the main sources of violence-provoking conflict in the city.

(4) *A plethora of security providers.* In Dili, close proximity, the presence of people from all the other districts as well as the presence of a variety of private and informal “security providers” alongside a formal security sector that is characterised by competition between the armed forces (F-FDTL) and the national

police (PNTL) further exacerbates the complexity of the urban environment.

Taken together, these particular aspects of Dili’s urbanity constitute it as a “disembedded” space within East Timorese society, a situation that is further exacerbated by the fact that it is both a primate and an “over-determined” city, due to the presence of the United Nations and other development agencies. Certainly, most governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, be they local or international, are based in the capital, even though many of them claim to be working primarily “in the districts”. Too often Dili is equated with Timor-Leste, to the detriment of development efforts seeking to assist the population at large, rather than just a select few.

3.0 Recommendations

The official end of the Crisis is usually taken to be the elections of 2007, when a coalition government was formed under the leadership of Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, and Dili has avoided further outbreaks of collective violence, including during major political crisis in 2008. Our research suggests however that the return to peace has been the result of institutional rather than societal changes, and that this means it is likely to be quite fragile. At the national level, and in an effort to prevent the reoccurrence of collective violence, the government institutionalised the “Joint Command”, which seeks to maintain collaboration between the PNTL and the F-FDTL. While the Joint Command itself does not solve the rivalries between these two formal securities providers – as was evident during *Operasaun Ninja* of 2010 – it does at least provide the appearance of a “unified security front” to the population in times of crisis. This has gone hand-in-hand with the denunciation of the supposed “ethnic” distinction between easterners and westerners as a “mechanised division”.

At the same time, however, the Crisis highlight how the “organised complexity” of the capital was also a function of the growing presence and reliance on private security companies (PSCs), as well as the continued salience of

various youth groups in terms of community-level security provision. The fact that many (if not most) PNTL and F-FDTL personnel are often also themselves affiliated with one of these groups means that the institutional multiplicity of the security sector beyond the formal sector needs to be engaged with, as it can undermine the demarcation of roles, responsibilities and jurisdictions. At the same time, multiple affiliations can also foster informal collaboration and potentially reinforce conflict resolution.

Similarly, the Crisis also highlighted how the specificities of Dili were an important factor in the outbreak of collective violence, and

suggests that it is necessary to take Dili seriously as an urban space in order to ensure that the conditions underpinning processes by which conflicts tip into violence are truly transformed. A number of concrete recommendations can be elaborated on the basis of these two basic issues (see table 1 below). While these are divided into two general headings, many of our recommendations are nonetheless very much inter-dependent. Needless to say, our suggestions are not stakeholder-specific, but instead seek to encourage thinking differently about the challenges of attaining political and socio-economic stability in Timor-Leste, and in Dili in particular.

Table 1: Main Recommendations

(1)	<i>Taking Dili seriously as an urban space</i>
a	Decreasing the fragmented nature of Dili requires the building of structured public spaces (such as parks, sports facilities and community halls) to bridge neighbourhood divides.
b	Overcoming social tensions and cleavages requires participatory planning procedures in which local leaders would be able to participate in the decision-making process.
c	An urban Dili would also need specific municipal structures which could empower pre-existing institutions (such as <i>suco</i> councils) or create new ones (such as an elected Mayor).
d	Given that land insecurity continues to be a significant problem in Dili, the drafting of a long-term urban plan would help diminish some of the insecurities of urban life.
e	Build up other municipalities around the country as a way of tackling Dili's character as an over-determined, primate city.
(2)	<i>Recognising the complexities of security provision in Dili</i>
a	The fragmented nature of Dili also implies that conflict resolution mechanisms need to be tailored to the needs of the community.
b	Decreasing conflict and tension between neighbourhoods would entail fostering inter-group interaction through participation in structured and meaningful activities.
c	Preventing the escalation of conflict into large-scale collective violence ultimately depends on the creation of, and trust in, a professional and impartial police force.

(1) *Taking Dili seriously as an urban space*¹

Considering Dili as a genuinely urban area would enable the “disembeddedness” of the city to be addressed. Due to the *uma kain* nature of social relationships in Timor-Leste, rural-urban migrations tends to see migrants from the districts settle in specific neighbourhoods already occupied by those from the same *uma lulik*. Rather than fostering social cohesion, these migration patterns inevitably recreate regional identities and rivalries. One way of dealing with Dili’s spatial fragmentation could include the creation of **structured public spaces** to bridge neighbourhood divides. These could include parks, sports fields or community halls where residents could mingle during the organisation of meaningful activities.

Photo 1:
Lack of Meaningful Public Space in Dili



A related aspect to consider would be the introduction of **participatory planning procedures**, in which neighbourhood residents can contribute to the decision-making processes related to their area. Indeed, there is much emphasis in East-Timorese society on elders or leaders “who speak well”. Giving local leaders at the *aldeia* or *suco* levels the opportunity to engage in dialogue and decision-making may thus be a way of overcoming social tensions and cleavages among and within Dili’s neighbourhoods.

Acknowledging Dili as an urban area would also entail giving it administrative identity.

Although decentralisation has recently been a major talking point in policy circles, including in the context of Timor-Leste’s Development Plan 2011-2030, decentralisation by itself runs the risk of creating additional layers of bureaucracy without necessarily fostering representation and local participation. Establishing **municipal structures** would be one way of ensuring such participation, particularly in urban Dili. One way of doing this would be to empower existing institutions, such as the *suco* councils, allowing them to have more say in the development and planning of specific neighbourhoods. One could also envisage the creation of **the post of Mayor** (at present, there is only an appointed District Administrator). Such a position would help dissociate the urban politics of Dili from the national political arena and give added impetus to participatory municipal structures and forums.

A logical follow-on from municipal structures and participatory planning procedures would be the drafting of **a long-term urban plan** for the capital. This is particularly important given that land insecurity continues to be one of the main conflict drivers in the capital.² Such a plan may increase buy-in from those residents who would have to relocate as a result and help regularise land tenure regimes. Instead of privileging the capital further, a distinction between urban and rural may actually help to **tackle Dili’s over-determination and primacy**. At the same time, it would also be important to encourage the development of other cities in the country in order to draw investment and aid away from the capital and into the districts – which, according to the National Development Plan, is indeed a strategy that the Government is looking to implement.

(2) *Recognising the complexities of security provision in Dili*

In contrast to Timor-Leste’s rural hinterlands, Dili is marked by a heterogeneous population and the presence of a multitude of local and international, formal and informal security providers. Dili is thus also the place in which traditional modes of conflict resolution come

face-to-face with the rule of law and Western-style community policing. A major challenge is thus finding a way of generating not just peaceful co-existence but also meaningful interaction. One way of doing so might be the institutionalisation of **local security forums**. The security challenges faced by local community go beyond the absence of physical violence and include various forms of threats and coercion related to scarce resources, forced displacement, and a lack of trust in the formal security sector. Local security forums would allow community and group leaders to come together with neighbourhood residents to discuss pertinent issue and even resolve inter-personal disputes.

This participatory process would have to go beyond the acknowledged local leaders (*xefe aldeia* and *xefe suco*) and bring together all the various groups and actors that residents turn to for protection and security provision. The government has recently launched such an initiative by creating an umbrella organisation for some of the main martial arts groups, although more repressive measures have also been taken.³ So far, however, the various other groups present in neighbourhoods are not part of these discussions. Related to the previous point, it would appear imperative to foster interaction between various youth groups that act as local security providers within specific neighbourhoods. One way of increasing such interaction is to have them come together in a public space that is not perceived to belong to a particular group's "turf". As already discussed above, it is the formation of meaningful and structured public space (such as community centres and sports facilities) that is likely to **foster inter-group interaction** and create a sense of belonging and

connectedness with the city and not just with one's clan or youth group.

Photo 2:
Some of Dili's security providers



Finally, effective security provision in Dili will require concerted efforts to ensure that the PNTL is acknowledged as the principle force for the enforcement of the rule of law in the city. At present, the PNTL sees itself undermined by and in competition with an array of other, formal and informal security providers. Moreover, while the PNTL has made major strides over the past decade, it nonetheless continues to be haunted by a "task force mentality" that privileges the robust maintenance of order over preventive police work. While during periods of heightened societal tensions the "task force" response appears to be effective, in everyday situations this image is more likely to create additional insecurity and increase distrust of the PNTL. Everyday situations require a **professional and impartial police force** that works together with the community (including traditional leaders and local youth groups) in an effort to prevent conflict and maintain social order.⁴

Endnotes

¹ The need to differentiate Dili from the other districts should not be seen as minimising the importance of developing appropriate interventions in rural areas in Timor Leste, where many suffer from severe malnutrition and lack access to even the most basic infrastructure.

² See Haburas Foundation, (2012), 'Povu nia lian kona-ba rai Timor: Resultadu husi konsultasaun Matadalan ba Rai', Dili: Haburas Foundation.

³ Recent years have seen several legislative initiatives seeking to curtail martial arts activities, and even to ban practice and training during the entire pre and post-election period (December 2011-December 2012).

⁴ For a recent discussion of the interactions between the PNTL and local communities see Belo, Néilson de Sousa C., and Mark R. Koenig, (2011), 'Institutionalizing Community Policing in Timor-Leste: Exploring the Politics of Police Reform', Occasional Paper No. 9, Dili: Asia Foundation.

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