

# Understanding the Tipping Point of Urban Conflict: Violence, Cities, and Poverty Reduction in the Developing World

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Urban violence is an increasingly significant global phenomenon. Over the past few years, a conventional wisdom has emerged within policy and research circles associating it with four key factors: poverty, youth bulges, political exclusion and gender-based insecurity. Underpinning this conventional wisdom is the notion that while cities are inherently conflictual spaces, this conflict is generally managed more or less peacefully through a range of social, cultural and political mechanisms, but that this can be disrupted by the presence of these four key factors, all of which can lead to conflict spilling over into chronic, generalised violence.

The “Urban Tipping Point” (UTP) project conceives of this potential transition from conflict to violence in terms of a “tipping point”. The origins of this idea go back to the 1950s; at its most basic, it posits that certain types of social phenomena can move from being relatively rare occurrences to very common ones in a rapid and exponential manner (see box 1). This has generally been understood in quantitative terms, with increases in poverty, the number of youth, levels of political exclusion, or gender-based insecurity beyond a certain threshold seen to lead to a sudden change in social conditions.

While recognising the importance of the general quantitative accumulation of particular factors, the UTP project has focused particularly on more qualitative factors such as general systemic transformations (including especially those that lead to changing distributional trends of particular factors), the occurrence of paradigmatic events, the evolution of

perceptions (for example due to particular media reporting), as well as the existence of particular networks of social agents as possible causal factors that can all lead to a tipping point being reached. At the same time, the UTP project has also been concerned with the temporal dimension of the notion of a tipping point, emphasising that it is not a static concept, but an inherently dynamic one, and that the notion of a tipping point can apply to both increases as well as reductions in violence. As such, the project has aimed to holistically apprehend whether specific forms of conflict are more or less likely to lead to violence, what types of violence emerge as a result of the presence of particular conflicts, and under what conditions this occurs, both locally and more structurally.

The UTP project has also explored how different forms of violence that are generated by tipping points processes interact with each other and can form “violence chains”, or in other words have a knock-on effect. The notion of a “violence chain” is inspired by the concept of a commodity chain, and is used to highlight the way that violence operates systemically, and involves a range of interconnected processes – that may not necessarily be immediately obvious. A violence chain involves three levels of analysis: the components of the chain (different types of violence), the way these articulate together (processes), and the way they are embedded within a broader institutional setting (context).

The ultimate aim of the UTP project has been to identify entry points in both tipping point processes and violence chains that might allow the implementation of policy initiatives to reduce the risk of violence, or break strategic linkages within violence chains. These changes might well be modest, and therefore both more easily efficiently put in place within poor urban communities and at the metropolitan level. Such initiatives contrast with efforts to address ‘macro-level’ structural issues such as poverty or demographic bulges.

The study focuses on four cities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, chosen because they were all paradigmatically associated with one of the factors conventionally identified as causing urban violence,

although they do not all display high levels of violence (see table 1). To this extent, the choice of research sites permitted an exploration of the reasons why urban conflict tips into violence as much as why it does not.

Table 1: UTP project field sites

City	Country	Issue	Level of violence
Dili	Timor Leste	Youth	High
Patna	India	Poverty	Low
Nairobi	Kenya	Political exclusion	High
Santiago	Chile	Gender-based insecurity	Low

Research was carried out collaboratively with four partner teams: Eco-Build Africa in Kenya, the Corporación SUR in Chile, the Institute for Human Development (IHD) in India, and the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. The project methodology combined both quantitative and qualitative techniques. In addition it also included dialogue with the various project stakeholders right from the beginning of the research in order to maximise the potential impact of findings. This included consultative forums within the research communities and with city-level policy-makers, as well as local, national, and global-level policy dissemination meetings.

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For further details, see:

[www.urbantippingpoint.org](http://www.urbantippingpoint.org)

## Box 1: Tipping points

The notion of the tipping point comes from epidemiology, and refers to the moment a given social process becomes generalised rather than specific in a rapid rather than gradual manner. This is usually seen to occur as a result of this social process acquiring a certain critical mass and crossing a particular threshold, but ultimately it is “the possibility of sudden change [that] is at the center of the idea of the Tipping Point” (Gladwell, 2007: 12).