

# CITIZENSHIP DRC POLICY BRIEFING

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE

Citizenship, Participation  
and Accountability

## Broadening Spaces for Citizens in Violent Contexts

Violence and everyday insecurity are amongst the root causes of poverty: a simple and true statement that has at last been acknowledged in several international agreements, including the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence (2008) and Dili Declaration (2010). Several new funding mechanisms have even been established to support efforts to reduce violence, including those that address the special security needs of excluded groups, women, youth and children. What recent policies have failed to adequately consider, however, is that poor and dispossessed people often perceive the state as a perpetrator or accomplice - whether by active complicity or passive omission - in the violence visited upon them. For policymakers and practitioners eager to move beyond top-down approaches to reducing insecurity and violence, this policy briefing offers insights into how local residents can be directly involved in finding solutions for their security and livelihood needs. Research from a range of contexts characterised by violence and everyday insecurity suggests that external actors can help to broaden spaces where citizens can take action in non-violent, socially legitimate ways, but that success depends on gaining a locally nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between violent and non-violent actors, and between forms of everyday violence and political violence.

### The state as perpetrator

Looking at issues of security and democracy from the perspectives of those most affected by violence can unsettle many common assumptions, primary among them that states have a monopoly on the use of violence and that they exercise the security function in the best interests of all citizens.

Recent research and publications by the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability highlight how in many contexts the state's security forces are seen to protect the interests of the state itself, of local or transnational private capital, or of particular groups - acting in favour of some sectors by wielding violence against others.

- In Nigeria, citizens report that both the Federation and southern states often prioritise protection of the transnational oil industry in the Delta region above the protection of civilians and their basic welfare needs. The state's "zero-tolerance" of vigilantism in the region, whilst seen by many as valid, can weaken voice and agency and exacerbate sectarian tensions.
- In Bangladesh, in some instances alliances are formed between state actors and local urban developers to harass and dislodge slum-dwellers.
- In Jamaica, citizens say that the police rarely investigate or address crime, and sometimes act as "gangstas" or hired guns for those with grudges against their neighbours.

### The absent state

In contexts where official state security provision is weak or inadequate, the security function is effectively delegated to

non-state actors. These often deploy a mix of violence and protection to perpetuate their political, social and economic control, with varying degrees of active complicity or passive tolerance from the state.

- In Medellín, Colombia, paramilitary groups, officially demobilised while in negotiations with the state, continue to control many poor areas of the city, offering protection against the very violence they help to generate.
- In Rio de Janeiro's favelas, militias are formed of former soldiers, police officers, prison guards and firemen. Using police equipment, these militias have invaded and taken control of several favelas, expelling those associated with drug trafficking.



*Children ride their bikes in the the Santa Marta favela, an informal settlement in Rio de Janeiro. Between 1993 and 2002, 16,426 people were 'disappeared' in Rio de Janeiro in the battle between drug trafficking groups, police and para-state militias. (Photo © Ivanildo Carmo dos Santos/ Agencia Olhares)*

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*The recognition that the state often fails to provide adequate security for its citizens or undermines democratic governance through actions committed in the name of security calls into question top-down approaches to reducing insecurity and violence*

## The political consequences of everyday violence

The fear and mistrust that result from violence shape people's perception of their political community, with direct consequences for the quality of democratic governance.

**Silencing:** Violence can be extremely disempowering. In many cases, victims of violence are unwilling or unable to speak out, failing even to recognise the violence to which they have been subjected. Research with victims of gender-based violence in El Salvador, indigenous communities suffering structural violence in Mexico and Peruvian school teachers who invoke *pishtacos* (evil spirits) as metaphors for the dangers of their world, all suggest that insecure and excluded people perceive security in very different ways from the dominant narratives and from each other.

**Segregating:** Violence is frequently legitimated through a process of 'othering' whereby a specific group is separated from others, dehumanized, labeled as dangerous, not belonging or unimportant - such as through the use of ethnic and religious stereotypes to justify violence in Nigeria, or the reinforcement of inequalities between the secure rich and insecure poor in Rio de Janeiro through private security provision.

**Subduing:** Violence deters citizen action in more direct ways as well. The physical appropriation of space by non-state security actors can prevent citizens from assembling and mobilising. In Rio de Janeiro's favelas, militias have occupied residents' association buildings and control space via patrols, cameras, barriers and wall murals. The use or threatened use of force during electoral processes constitutes a direct disruption of procedural democracy. Organised armed actors also use their monopoly on or dominance over the means of violence to establish themselves as quasi-legitimate mediators. In these contexts, non-violent civil society groups may exist, although go largely unrecognised.

Besides political consequences, state violence and tolerance of violence have intimate personal consequences: they tend to feed other forms of violence between citizens, including in the home, schools and the neighbourhood.

## Citizen coping strategies in the absence of security

In the absence of an effective response from the state to the everyday violence and insecurity they suffer, citizens may adopt a range of strategies to cope with, respond to or resist the violence and those who perpetrate it. These coping strategies and alternative structures are not necessarily benign. They can have both positive and negative consequences for citizens, their democratic participation and levels of violence in their communities. As such they are a critical link between forms of everyday violence and political violence. The Citizenship DRC's research reveals three main strategies employed by citizens in violent contexts.

- (i) **Withdrawal into partial citizenship or self-censorship:** In the face of physical and symbolic appropriation of space by violent actors, citizens in Rio de Janeiro's favelas in Brazil withdraw from public spaces and public facilities, leaving them to the militia and drug gangs.
- (ii) **Peaceful coexistence with violent actors:** In Jamaica citizens evoke protective services of 'community gangs' against the real 'criminal gangs'; in one case in Colombia, citizens bolstered the authority of violent actors by 'keeping them sweet'.
- (iii) **Establishing parallel governance or security structures:** In Bangladesh, NGOs work to prevent and redress gender-based violence using the parallel community arbitration mechanism known as *Shalish*; in the Niger Delta, citizens have established their own vigilante groups to protect their interests against predatory foreign capital.

### LOCAL STRATEGIES ARE NEEDED TO COMPLEMENT, NOT SUBSTITUTE FOR, NATIONAL LEVEL PROGRAMMES

Since 2004 in Nigeria, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) has provided support for the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission to promote justice as a solution to the root causes of violence. Yet, the tragic eruptions of violence in Jos since November 2008 (and a recent Strategic Conflict Assessment by the UK Government) demonstrate that the underlying causes of violence have not been adequately addressed.

In Jamaica, DFID has been active in modernising the Jamaican Constabulary Force, whilst supporting a £1 million programme to restore services such as security provision, refuse collection, water and sanitation, power and health clinics to six neighbourhoods where organised criminals and gang leaders have been removed. Research by the Citizenship DRC suggests that such programmes provide a moment of opportunity to get citizens engaged.

In both cases, unless trust between authorities and communities (and within communities) is restored through dialogue, sustainable progress is unlikely.

*National level strategies to address violence need to be complemented by community-level initiatives that are mindful of existing strategies adopted by citizens to cope with, respond to or resist violence.*

## Integrating citizens' perspectives into violence reduction strategies

Given the complexity of state and non-state actors, overlapping structures of power and authority, and multiple forms of everyday violence that characterise many insecure communities, it is essential that external interventions are grounded in a thorough understanding of the local context. Otherwise, there are real risks that interventions might exacerbate local tensions, inadvertently support violent actors and heighten insecurity.

It is the citizens living in these communities who possess vital knowledge about local power dynamics, existing coping strategies, sources of resilience, spaces and organisational structures that might be built upon to design appropriate community security or violence reduction strategies. Local citizens are also able to help analyse how various interventions might affect different local actors and how these dynamics and impacts might best be managed.

In the interest of carrying out research that was not only ethical but that might in itself contribute to positive change, researchers from the Citizenship DRC documented lessons that would be useful for any external actor who wishes to understand the realities of violence:

- Sensitive, respectful consultation with communities that enhances trust and avoids causing them harm;
- Working with non-violent community leaders and community-based organisations using participatory action research to analyse and raise awareness of local power dynamics, sources of insecurity and forms of resilience; and
- Using pre-existing community initiatives as less risky 'entry points' for addressing broader issues of violence and insecurity.

## Using participatory and action research in violent contexts

Participatory and action research methods are one way of providing a space for citizenship. By employing techniques such as participatory video and public theatre, researchers can promote dialogue and cooperation in communities, which can help to address the causes of violence. At the same time, such techniques carry risks. Public mediums like theatre and video can exacerbate the already difficult task of holding discussions on sensitive topics, and should be used with caution in violent contexts.

- In northern Nigeria, researchers working with the Theatre for Development Centre found that participatory learning and action (including theatre, song and dance) had positive impacts. Community-designed performances created the space for citizens to transcend traditional hierarchies and voice their concerns and complaints, without fear of sanctions from the local elite. Following this, communities were able to catalogue their collective concerns before meeting with local authorities.
- In Brazil, researchers put video cameras in the hands of favela residents living with everyday violence and worked with them to produce a documentary film. The resulting film and multi-media CD-ROM addressed popular myths about favela residents and have since been used to promote dialogue with community leaders, government officials, politicians and the media on security issues in Rio de Janeiro.

In these ways, donors can support mechanisms for local groups to develop and articulate an agenda for negotiating with formal state institutions.

### **BUILDING ON LOCAL INITIATIVES AND CITIZEN ACTION**

If they receive appropriate support, existing, but often unrecognised, associations can provide a building-block for citizen engagement with a newly democratising state.

- In Angola, civil society appeared to have been decimated by 25 years of conflict, war and authoritarian rule. Yet, Citizenship DRC research has shown that local civil society associations emerged in the displacement camps amidst the conflict and continue to work for better services and treatment for poor and displaced people.
- In Bangladesh, large-scale NGOs have taken over many functions of the state. Research by the Citizenship DRC suggests that some of these NGOs, beyond delivering services, also contribute to the formation of a sense of citizenship for their members. This sense of citizenship is an important stepping-stone to fostering stronger relationships between citizens and the state and increasing the capacity of the state in Bangladesh to act.
- In Mexico, groups of indigenous people met to discuss how different kinds of violence affect their communities and shared their reflections with organisations focusing on health, justice, and education. Recognising the role of violence in limiting access to each of these areas has been an important step toward considering how the state can better relate to marginalised and extremely poor rural indigenous villages.



## Implications for policy and practice

- **Recognise that state actors can be a source of security and insecurity:** State actors may protect some sectors, tolerate or perpetrate violence against others, or simply abdicate responsibility to protect some groups of citizens. It is imperative that policy makers design specific strategies for coping with state-sponsored violence, and to address the consequences of state failure to provide security. Currently policies fail to safeguard programmes and communities against state-sponsored violence.
- **Recognise the threat of violence in “non-fragile” contexts:** International donors have increasingly worked to address violence in “fragile” or “conflict-affected” states. Yet violence - or the threat of it - is an everyday reality for many people across the world, including in states considered fairly “effective” in delivering rights and resources to their citizens. Policy makers can usefully build on the recent work of the OECD-DAC and Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence Reduction to support interventions in ‘non-fragile’, democratising or democratic states that suffer from pockets of violence.
- **Work at both state and community level:** State-led initiatives to strengthen judicial systems and security forces are important, but in order to build effective state-society interactions, attention must also be paid to supporting the capacity of non-violent civil society organisations in these contexts. It can be particularly effective to work with individuals and organisations already well-placed to effect positive change, but caution must be exercised in understanding the positions and interests of different actors.
- **Conduct detailed analysis of local power dynamics, actors and relationships:** It is essential to fully understand the often complex medley of state and non-state actors, their role in security provision and perpetration of violence, and the linkages between them. Participatory and action research



*Actors performing in public in Kano, Nigeria in 2005. Public drama is one method of opening space for dialogue in violent settings.*

methods can be effective to elicit citizens’ local knowledge, raise awareness and build ownership and sustainability of initiatives to reduce violence.

- **Develop intervention strategies based on the local context:** There is no ‘one size fits all’ model for community security or violence reduction programmes. Universalist or overly state-centric initiatives can often do more harm than good at a local level.
- **Recognise that citizens’ responses to violence are not necessarily benign:** The strategies citizens adopt can have positive or negative consequences for democratic participation and levels of violence. Parallel non-state structures can act as building blocks towards state accountability, yet, they can also reproduce the selectivity, violence and anti-democratic tendencies of state provision, as well as undermine the state’s legitimacy.
- **Build on existing sources of resilience, ‘safe spaces’ and structures for change:** In many cases, it may be better to find an entry point unrelated to violence, then build awareness and broaden to issues of violence and insecurity.

Over the past ten years, researchers from the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability have documented nearly 150 cases of how citizen-led initiatives can serve to build state institutions by conferring legitimacy, demanding accountability, influencing responsive policies, countering elite capture of resources and implementing effective services. More recently, the researchers have turned this perspective on a variety of contexts where endemic violence reduces people’s willingness to engage in the public sphere. The full text of this Policy Briefing and more information about the Citizenship DRC and its work are available on its website: [www.drc-citizenship.org](http://www.drc-citizenship.org).

## Further reading

Kabeer, Naila, Simeen Mahmud and Jairo Guillermo Isaza Castro (2010) NGOs’ Strategies and the Challenge of Development and Democracy in Bangladesh. IDS Working Paper 343, IDS: Brighton.

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Pearce, Jenny, Rosemary McGee and Joanna Wheeler (Forthcoming) Violence, Security and Democracy: Perverse Interfaces and Their Implications for Citizens in the Global South, Forthcoming synthesis paper for the Citizenship DRC: Brighton

Wheeler, Joanna (2005) “Rights without citizenship? Participation, family and community in Rio de Janeiro” in Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions, Naila Kabeer ed., Zed Books: London.

## Credits

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