

Urban Planning and Its Relationship to Conflict Dynamics

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Abstract. Urban planning has been a significant factor in warfare throughout history, yet it has not received systematic scientific evaluation. Viewing conflictual events from a purely planning perspective could lead to a better understanding of the critical dynamics of many of today's civil wars and nations' conflicts. Additionally, it can also help recognize how these dynamics influence conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding. This paper argues that urban planning should be seen as an essential piece to contemporary conflict analysis and legislative policy development by governmental authorities, international organizations, donor agencies, NGOs, and privatized firms interested in conflict resolution, et cetera. While there is a growing consensus that there is a certain linkage between urban planning and conflicts continuation and resolution, there are significant disagreements about how important it is in relation to other political, social, cultural, and identity factors. This paper focuses on the relationship between urban planning and conflict dynamics and how it contributes to severe conflicts.

Key words: urban conflicts, urban concentration, urbanization, conflict dynamics, urban centers.

1. Urbanization and urban concentration

1.1. Urban conflicts

Throughout history, urban planning has played a central role in warfare, yet it has not received systematic scientific evaluation. Viewing conflictual events from a purely planning perspective could lead to a better understanding of the critical dynamics of many of today's civil wars and nations conflicts. Additionally, it can also help recognize how these dynamics influence conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding. As such, urban planning should be seen as an essential piece to contemporary conflict analysis and legislative policy development by governmental authorities, international organizations, donor agencies, NGOs, and privatized firms interested in conflict resolution, etc.

While there is a growing consensus that there is a certain linkage between urban planning and conflicts continuation and resolution, there are significant disagreements about how important it is in relation to other political, social, cultural, and identity factors. By studying the increasing importance of megacities and urban centers, scholars have sought to understand how these cities shape certain violent acts and internal threats in causing unstable environments. Cities may have conflict potentials through two primary factors: urbanization and urban concentration¹.

Urbanization simply can be identified as the massive movement of people from rural areas to urban areas. Urbanization may face changes rapidly due to natural disasters, conflicts, or economic prosperity and sometimes get associated with significant, non-violent anti-regime activism². However, urbanization is still negatively associated with prolonged and orderly civil wars³: urbanization makes it difficult for initial insurgencies to take shape. As more and more people from diverse backgrounds move into cities, mobilization along divisions based on identity is becoming increasingly difficult.

¹ Auvinen 1997

² Auvinen, 1997 and Kalyvas, 2007

³ Urdal 2008

1.2. Urban concentration

Urban concentration refers to the distribution of the population in a particular area in a city. Urban concentration is classified as "high" when most of a country's population lives in a few large urban centers (usually one or two). Moreover, urban concentration is regarded "low" when people live in a city with multiple urban centers. The concentration of urban populations is often directly related to the concentration of the states of power and wealth, or to a conscious policy aimed at appeasing the people of urban centers. In recent times, cities account for a disproportionate share of economic activity and tax revenues, and are central sites of political organization and mobilization⁴. State power gathers around these focal points and from there slides to the periphery⁵, with the concentration of state institutions often being more pronounced in urban centers⁶.

In countries with low levels of urban concentration—where multiple urban centers are spread across their territory—state power is more evenly distributed, increasing the state's ability to project power into rural spaces. In countries with high levels of urban concentration "only one or few cities hold most of the urban population", as the resources of state power tend to be concentratedly distributed. Governments with concentrated populations usually continue to invest in already established urban centers, and regimes tend to rely on public policies that benefit urban centers while pushing the costs of these policies onto peripheral cities and rural populations⁷. Thus, the neglected cities are relatively deprived of the good governance and provision of social services that have been shown to dampen the propensity for civil conflict⁸. In this sense, urban concentration contributes to the "social inaccessibility" of the state, as decision makers may decide to leave the underdeveloped peripheral regions neglected and not to invest in its infrastructure or institutions.

Urban concentration can lead to the intensity of state institutions in major cities, or a few large cities. In some cases, these resources get tensed and the urban center becomes a source of political instability. This occurs when the growth of cities exceeds the capacity building of the state. State resources are limited by economic crises, social divisions (socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious) emerge within the city, or political incompetence and mismanagement hinder effective service delivery. As first conceived by Butcher and Griffiths (2017) and applied to foreign policy, urban concentration across space can be conceptualized as a topographical map of power. Low levels of urban concentration correspond to a relatively smooth map, with minimal differences. High levels of urban concentration represent one or a few significant peaks with vast valleys in between. The contrast between them highlights how better-off residents enjoy all aspects of life in high-concentration areas, while others are limited to barely scraping out an existence in low concentration areas. As a result, this paper argues that civil conflicts are more likely to be particularly severe when urban concentration is on high rates. In these cases, the central government may retain complete control only of the capital. At the same time, the periphery provides the opportunity for local political entrepreneurs and affiliated strongmen to provide protection to a disaffected population long ignored by the center⁹. As a result of the relationship

⁴ Jacobs et al 1984

⁵ Tollefsen and Buhaug 2015

⁶ Herbst 2000

⁷ Bates 1981

⁸ Tollefsen et al 2002

⁹ Galula 1964

between urban concentration and constrained state power, three conditions emerge that tend to foster highly intense civil conflict: (1) insurgents' mobilization in the countryside, (2) insurgent targeting of urban centers, and (3) the central state's indiscriminate violence in the periphery.

2. High urban concentration and conflict dynamics

These dynamics are often coupled with the shrinking of ruling services as the state's military apparatus expands to meet new threats. We discuss each of these in turn.

1. Rural areas are favorable to forming uprisings as they are the ideal spaces for rebels to pool their strength. These areas have the advantage of a less densely populated geographic area, making it easier to set up bases for training recruits, and from these bases, local insurgencies strategize with relatively less concern about state repression. It seeks covert foreign support from foreign countries¹⁰. If the militants have allies abroad, particularly in border areas - it makes it easier for foreign countries to provide logistical support and materials. Thus, rebels are better able to match existing military strength, thus prolonging and intensifying conflicts¹¹. Moreover, attacks on isolated army positions and surprise ambushes against government forces far from urban centers are easier to launch than tightly coordinated attacks on major cities or pitched battles¹². Additionally, the ethnic or religious sectarian factor, when urban planning processes have been built on a sectarian or ethnic basis, especially in rural areas that do not receive much attention from state institutions, becomes a popular base that is easy to recruit and ideal places for the outbreak of sparks of wars.
2. After mobilizing insurgents into cities' countryside, areas with a high level of urban concentration appear as intelligible and valuable targets for insurgent groups. For example, a single insurgent attack on mass transit infrastructure in urban areas may lead to a widespread propaganda for the insurgents' cause. However, it may also lead to massive casualties and economic hardship in the long term. This type of operation is highly attractive to the media. It helps signal the strength of the rebels. This type of focused propaganda improves the insurgents' ability to recruit new members from the city center.
3. The limited capacity of state institutions in remote areas -due to the inability to control the use of military force over such long distances- increases the government's reliance on indiscriminate violence against civilians in the countryside because of the limited access to reliable information about insurgents¹³. For instance, this violence backfired in Sudan's western Darfur state against the Sudan Liberation Movement Army and the Justice and Equality Movement¹⁴. Senegal against the Movement for Democratic Forces for Change¹⁵, and Suriname against the Jungle Commandos¹⁶.

Urban concentration - the distribution of urban populations across one or more cities - can generate a higher likelihood of civil conflict¹⁷. However, the percentage of people living in urban areas versus rural areas is significant, which is highly associated with socio-economic

¹⁰ Veron et al 2004

¹¹ Kalyvas and Balcells 2010

¹² Buhaug and Lujala 2009

¹³ Kalyvas 2006

¹⁴ Waal 2007

¹⁵ Security 1998

¹⁶ McDonald 1988

¹⁷ Auvinen 1997



development and state capacity, and thus, it could lead to negative correlations with laying foundations of a civil war, as discussed earlier.

3. Conclusion

We can note a number of potentially important things regarding urban concentration. Firstly, demographic and socio-demographic variables, where larger populations are believed to allow protection for rebels from superior regime forces, and urban areas with higher densities tend to be less concentrated. Secondly, distinguishing minorities; whereas distinguishing minorities from ethnic groups in a certain country may help capture grievances between groups that can cause intense civil conflict, it is important to interpret this because urban concentration and other forms of geographical inequality may stem from particular geographical distributions. Thirdly, youth distribution: the distribution of youth between the ages of 0 and 24 affects the community's ability to mobilize and the potential for violence, especially in urban areas¹⁸. Young children were counted because many of them are used in combat and support tasks in conflicts armed around the world. Fourthly, the economic and political factors associated with urban planning may be linked to the start of bloodstained civil wars. It has been demonstrated that areas with lower levels of urban development are closely related to the formation of hotbeds of conflict.

4. References

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¹⁸ Urdal 2006