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CHAPTER 7

PREDATORY URBANIZATION

URBAN LAND AND HOUSING AS TARGETS FOR ARMED GROUPS AND MAFIAS

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Urbanization is a powerful global trend affecting societies in ways that are still underappreciated by governments, development practitioners, and the general public. Urban expansion into peripheral lands and growing demand for land and housing inside cities leads to increased competition, with potentially destabilizing and violent consequences for states, people, and the climate.

The global urban area has been expanding steadily, and not always in ways people expect—such as around large cities. The global land area of towns and "semi-dense areas" (surrounding or suburban areas)[1] doubled between 1975 and 2020.[2] Urban area growth tends to be particularly rapid in low-income countries that are insufficiently prepared or resourced to face additional pressures on land governance and housing; UN-Habitat estimates city land in such countries will more than double between 2020 and 2070.[3] This growing demand for (and occupation—formal or informal—of) urban land is reshaping rural areas too. For instance, a global study of cropland area between 2003 and 2019 showed that the building of residences, industries, and infrastructure was the second-largest driver of global cropland loss, responsible for 16 percent of total global cropland area loss—with urban sprawl accounting for 35 percent of the cropland loss in South Asia.[4]

Climate change increases pressure on urban land and housing markets, as one of its most well-documented effects is pushing rural populations to migrate to cities as their agricultural lifestyles are disrupted by droughts, floods or storms.[5]

Urban population growth amid poorly managed land-tenure systems leads to increased competition, price speculation, and severe housing shortages—turning urbanization into a source of intercommunity tensions and crime rather than a driver of development. In countries undergoing armed conflict, seizure of land and houses by armed groups is a revenue source and a tool for strengthening political control over cities and civilians. This was the case with the Islamic State during its control of several Iraqi and Syrian cities between 2013 and 2017, with property confiscation playing an important role in financing and rewarding its fighters as loot.[6] After armed conflicts, governments' inability—or unwillingness—to address land disputes can have cascading effects on other political and peacebuilding domains, such as reconciliation, electoral violence, and grievances that stoke the fires of renewed conflict.

A related—if lower intensity—type of conflict is linked to intercommunal tensions arising as cities expand rapidly and communities' traditional claims or informal tenure over land are challenged.[7] In areas with preexisting ethnic or social rifts, this can lead aggrieved groups resorting to finding militias or gangs for protection—such as in Nairobi, where landlord-tenant grievances along ethnic lines have led to the involvement of violent organized gangs such as the Mungiki, a group that emerged as a youth militia and later morphed more into a violent criminal gang.[8] Organized crime in real estate, illegal construction, and urban land grabs and corruption are even more widespread issues. As we will see in this chapter, this type of crime is a major source of insecurity even in some of the world's largest democracies, such as Brazil and Kenya.

The impact of these urban land dynamics on communities is accompanied by local authoritarian behavior of mafias and violent actors, which impose rules and stifle civil society in the areas they seize. Vast urban areas, even inside large

cities of democratic countries, have populations whose claims to house and land are tied to mafias, gangs, or militias that impose exploitative conditions and threaten to evict or force residents to depend on their (often substandard) services and security.

Most of the cases in this chapter fit within these three broad types of armed groups: gangs, mafias, and militias. Definitions for these different groups vary, but broadly the chapter considers the following: gangs and mafias are both criminal organizations, but the latter tends to be less visible and operate behind the scenes with corrupt contacts among politicians and state agencies, whereas gangs tend to have a more visible presence with weapons and local illegal drug sales. The term "militia" contains many different definitions, from auxiliary forces linked to regular state militaries to local defense forces.[9] Here, the term refers to nonstate armed groups claiming to provide protection to a certain community or to fight on behalf of a group, such as an ethnic group, clan or political party.

Toward a Common Conceptual Framework: Predatory Urbanization

Mafias, gangs, and militias are frequent features in media reports of urban violence, and a small but growing community of urban-violence experts has also devoted some attention to land and housing issues. But perhaps because the term "land" tends to evoke rural-agricultural issues, the role of armed groups in seizing or exploiting land has been more frequently studied in rural contexts than in urban ones.[10] The vast evidence base available on the "global land rush"[11]—large-scale land acquisitions for business purposes in agriculture, mining, or tourism—"has been largely blind to the fact that large-scale land investments will often trigger urbanization," or, perhaps even more problematic, urbanization itself will take place at the expense of cities' green or agricultural surroundings.[12]

When predatory actors such as militias, gangs, or mafias are documented in urban land and housing, there is also confusion about what to call the problem. One author has complained that Indian media portray a country beset by land and sand mafias but argue that these groups are "less criminal organizations than informal networks of public and private elites that use coercion to capture land rents."[13] A similar debate occurs in Brazil, where armed groups aggressively occupying urban land are widely called militias because the investigative journalist who first reported on it thought that was the word that best described its paramilitary ties to Rio de Janeiro's military police forces.[14] So what to call this problem, and is it even one coherent problem?

This chapter has been motivated by this confusion—the sense that despite abundant evidence of armed actors' violent strategies to acquire urban land or build urban areas, the academic and policy worlds lack a common language to discuss and address it. An equally important confusion relates to policy responses, since policy communities are not always clear about who is responsible, if anyone, for preventing or tackling conflict and crime around urban land.

This policy ambiguity further exposes urban communities to human rights violations, threats, and actual violence by armed groups. It also occurs at a moment of increased pressures linked to global trends discussed in this compendium. Climate change has the most direct and urgent impact, especially through processes such as sea level rise and disruption of rural livelihoods, causing migration or displacement, either intraurban or rural to urban dislocation. C40, a city network focused on climate change, estimated that 8 million people will move to 10 of its member cities by 2050 because of climate change.[15] This trend is already under way: In Bangladesh, climatic changes and increased storm activities have driven many rural residents to migrate, either temporarily or permanently, to large cities like Dhaka, where they are placed in situations of modern slavery, many women are forced into sex work, and almost all low-income migrants live in precarious accommodations.[16] Conversely, the voracious appetite for urban land also drives climate change, as experts warn that "globally, urban land expansion is one of the primary drivers of habitat and biodiversity loss," while "urbanisation's role in the climate crisis is being overlooked."[17]

The linkage of the urban land issue with authoritarianism is also impactful. Political controversy has been at the center of many European and North American cities when it comes to the reception of foreign migrants and refugees. Large cities with longstanding presence of international business, tourism, and trade often have more liberal views toward immigrants than national governments, leading to tensions. This has led to such moves by the US federal government, perceived by many urban residents as authoritarian, as the deployment of National Guard troops and threats to cut funding to cities that do not cooperate with federal anti-immigration crackdowns.[18] In the United Kingdom, cities such as London have thrived largely due to their role as global hubs for business, tourism and a diverse workforce from all over the world, but right-wing parties have significantly increased their voting shares in less liberal corners of the country. The anti-immigration discourse affects refugees in temporary accommodations, who have been threatened and sometimes physically attacked. This shows how housing and land can be emotionally—and violently—tied to narratives of nativist belonging and exclusion of certain groups – often emerging outside of large liberal hubs but affecting those living there.[19] These antiliberal views of urban spaces as exclusive to certain groups depending on immigration status is a historical contradiction, as cities—from the early Mesopotamian centers to multiple current US municipalities—have been shaped by external population flows. The anti-immigration narrative comes at a time when immigrants and low-income residents are also affected by waves of gentrification that favor economic elites and lead to pressures to relocate. These global trends risk imposing a divisive view of the urban space that clashes with large cities' roles as meeting points and cosmopolitan centers.

In Global South settings, urban communities affected by the armed groups discussed in this chapter face another type of authoritarianism: gangs or militias exerting control over vital services (water, electricity, land) and enforcing rules over local—usually low-income—communities. This local power achieved by nonstate armed groups has been methodically documented by scholars in Latin America focused on "criminal governance," which is the imposition of rules on urban communities by criminal groups.[20] Urban scholar Diane Davis has described a pattern of "fragmented sovereignty" in cities, with nonstate armed groups forming "alternative networks of coercion, allegiance, and reciprocity" that challenge traditional state-centered political organization.[21] It is this local form of authoritarianism that we discuss here.

This chapter aims to connect the accounts and policy discussions on violent exploitation of urban land and housing occurring within individual cities and weave them into a public discussion. Although I am wary of adding a new concept for busy municipal officials and other policymakers to understand, it is vital to simplify the language around these violent practices so evidence can be collected in a systematic way and responses can be discussed across cities, countries, and regions. This chapter argues that groups such as Brazil's militias, India's and Italy's land mafias, the Islamic State in Mosul, and ethnic militias or gangs in Nairobi, although vastly different in many of their goals and practices, engage in a specific category of action when it comes to exploiting urban land and housing in ways that deliberately harm communities—including threatening, evicting, using corruption to grab public or private land, and arbitrarily seizing properties.

I propose calling this behavior by armed groups and corrupt actors predatory urbanization, which conveys the deliberate use or threat of violence (coercion) to shape urban land and housing practices in exploitative ways that harm communities. This phenomenon is clearly separate from community-driven actions to settle on unoccupied urban space, for example, squatting or building informally in peripheries or slums due to lack of housing among the poor.

I define predatory urbanization as sustained action by organized groups to grab land, evict (or threaten) residents, seize houses, illegally build, or corrupt planning processes in cities through the use or threat of violence. The use of the word "sustained" restricts the definition to cases of repeated or systematic action over a period of time, as opposed to one-off episodes. The definition also refers to actions by "organized groups," which separates this phenomenon from disputes between individuals fighting over property. This includes the actions of governments, such as now-deposed

Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and its land and housing policies that punished groups seen as sympathetic to opposition armed groups.[22]

Starting with this important clarification on why we need to group certain urban land-related challenges into a policy-friendly concept, the chapter will proceed as follows: Part one surveys the evidence on conflicts and crime in urban land and housing, showing how the global urbanization process has exacerbated urban land challenges in various contexts. Part two will briefly survey the disparate responses from local and national governments and civil society, with an overarching—and slightly disheartening—finding that international debate on urban land challenges has almost universally sidelined issues of armed violence and organized crime. On a more positive note, the chapter will map some (nonexhaustive) promising policies and projects drawn from related practice areas and highlight how they can help reduce predatory practices in urban land.

The Many Faces of Predatory Urbanization

That the hunger for urban land and housing can encourage aggressive business practices among real estate entrepreneurs was abundantly illustrated in the global financial crisis of 2008, linked to financial bets on risky mortgages in the United States.[23] But in contexts of weak institutional structures and oversight mechanisms over urban expansion and construction—which tends to be the case in low-income settings affected by organized crime or transitioning from armed conflict—that hunger can combine aggressive market behavior with actual physical aggression, that is, armed violence by organized groups.

Urban land has become a "scarce and expensive commodity."[24] Whereas rural land also faces increased demand for use related to food production, energy generation (through wind farms for example), mineral extraction, and more—to a great extent to supply growing urban populations—cities face specific challenges because of the concentration of that demand in compact areas and its highly informal aspect. This paves the way for conflicts and profiteering by illicit actors, including through the use of violence. In other words, the global rush for city land and housing has also been a violent process for many urban communities, affected by evictions, corruption, threats, extortion, and insecure tenure.

Predatory urbanization refers to a particular process of "production" of urban space—the process through which the built and social environments of cities take shape. Often this production is organized and directed by powerful actors, though their power often derives from sources other than the state's—usually weapons, coercion, and corruption. The latter method, corruption, indicates that the state is not removed from these practices but often participates either through the help of corrupt individuals or institutionalized practices of bribery and collusion between state agencies and mafias (as the chapter will explore in detail). This corruption underlines the pervasive impact of local authoritarianism, since it reduces the recourse residents have to report land grabs or reverse evictions by predatory actors, thereby strengthening armed groups' local power.

Armed Conflict

The value of urban land and housing for armed groups has been increasingly studied under the category of housing, land, and property (HLP), which one prominent article has described as a recent "innovation" in conflict financing, as armed groups after the Cold War have explored a variety of illegal pathways to self-fund.[25] More policy attention is advised in this area, as HLP significantly differs from more "famous" conflict-financing commodities such as minerals, in ways that make them even more attractive for conflict actors. For instance, whereas a batch of diamonds can be sold only once, land and housing continuously generate revenue for armed groups over time—for instance, through rent—and can be resold multiple times.[26]

This has been particularly important for the Islamic State during its control of cities like Mosul in Iraq and Raqqah in Syria, roughly between 2013 and 2017. The terrorist and insurgent group confiscated properties and profited from renting it or selling it, including through auctions. Renting in particular seems to have been an important recurrent source of revenue that chimed with the group's strategy to separate itself from foreign sources of funding vulnerable to sanctions or seizures in the international banking system, with one prominent Islamist extremist writer encouraging violent extremist groups to occupy facilities or land with economic value.[27] In Mosul alone, the estimated annual revenue from state-owned property that passed to the Islamic State when it conquered the city was $15 million; this excludes private properties or land confiscated by the group.[28]

Urban land and housing also have a nonmonetary value for armed groups, as they can be used to hand out property as in-kind benefits to fighters. The Islamic State granted houses confiscated from alleged "disbelievers" or "apostates" to fighters to live in with their families rent-free but not as owners.[29]

In Somalia, the insurgent group al-Shabaab uses urban land in a different way that is also linked to the dual emotional and monetary value of property in cities. The group sets up mobile courts to resolve disputes between residents of the capital Mogadishu as a way of shoring up its claim to be a better administrator than the government, whose normal courts in the city are considered slow and prone to corruption. One of the most frequent issues heard by the mobile courts is land disputes in the city, where prices have risen considerably amid rural-to-urban migration and displacement flows as well as incomplete land registries, laying the ground for disputes, land grabs by powerful individuals, and unfair evictions.[30] Al-Shabaab courts are considered highly efficient on this, as the group threatens to kill those it judges to have occupied land or houses unlawfully, even in the capital, where its intelligence and terrorist cells operate despite the proximity to government and international armed forces.[31] The group also "taxes" property construction in Mogadishu, sometimes up to 25 percent of the final value of the property.[32]

Whereas armed conflict challenges such as these might seem far from the remit of urban development, planning, and regulation professionals, armed groups' ability to exploit land and housing is related to land tenure conflicts and insecurity over who owns which part of urban land. Ownership over valuable land, "especially in cities and towns," has been "at the heart" of the armed conflict in Somalia since the country's descent into anarchy in the early 1990s.[33] Insecurity of tenure and destroyed or incomplete land registries have formed the background for this contention, with clans and powerful individuals exploiting this urban (in)governance issue to lay competing claims over land in rapidly growing cities like Mogadishu, turning urban land into "flashpoints for violence."[34] More broadly, as Melanie Lombart argues, "the state's lack of ability to guarantee secure tenure at the household level may translate into a more generalised inability to address wider questions of urban conflict and violence," and conversely, land-tenure reform can be a powerful tool to promote reconciliation and trust in public institutions after conflict.[35]

Intercommunal Conflict over Urban Land and Housing

Whereas armed conflicts place urban land and housing in the middle of clashes between rival actors, certain conflicts arise inside cities (or in its peripheries) because of disputes over valuable urban plots. Expansion of built-up urban areas increasingly encroaches on ancestral homes of certain communities, and when groups resort to evictions or political leverage to acquire control over land, conflict can turn violent.[36] Whereas intercommunal conflicts can involve long-standing legal claims to land, armed groups such as militias or gangs can intervene on the side of certain groups while also escalating the conflict for monetary or political control over urban areas.

This has been a pervasive problem in Nairobi, where some politicians have developed a tradition of stoking ethnic rivalries over land and favoring certain groups in exchange for votes from certain communities. In Mathare North, one of the city's major informal settlements, groups have resorted to using armed groups recruited from ethnic networks of

young men to intimidate and prevail over opposing groups. Landlords' use of force against tenants have also been seen as attacks by one ethnic group over another, especially as certain tribes tend to be more prevalent than others in land ownership.[37] In Kibera, another informal settlement, Nubians and members of the Kikuyu tribe have historically dominated ownership of land and rented it out to migrants, with the Luo community having become particularly numerous in the area. This inequality in land ownership and the power held by landlords over tenants has led to tensions, which in election times has been leveraged by politicians for votes and led to ethnic clashes.[38]

A similar dynamic of land contestation leveraged by armed groups took place in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, during the height of intercommunal tensions in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The growth of the Pashtun community has increased competition for land with Urdu-speaking communities, with militias on each side supporting encroachment over unoccupied land and the conflicts that inevitably arise along ethnic lines.[39] Land grabbers have stoked those tensions by planting flags of ethnic political parties to strengthen one group's claim over areas, further stoking ethnic tensions.[40] Militias were also allied with land mafias to evict residents belonging to a rival group, which in turn resorted to their own militias, leading to a vicious cycle of violence with urban land and housing at its center. In a remarkable similarity to the Mogadishu example above, in Karachi, the Pakistani Taliban (which was strong at that time) capitalized on the issue to establish courts in nearby towns to hear complaints and pass judgement over urban land disputes.[41]

The case of Karachi is particularly illustrative of the ways political violence by militias, greed by land mafias, and ethnic conflicts can intertwine and reinforce cycles of armed violence. Community claims and need for land are not the source of predation; what is the source is the exploitation of such needs by armed groups for political or economic benefit, especially when such groups find weak institutions and regulations incapable of establishing secure tenure or cater to popular needs for housing and services.

Organized Crime

The role of organized crime in urban land and housing is even more pervasive and widespread than the previous two categories, potentially affecting a much wider set of cities. It is also more commonly studied, though unevenly. For example, due in part to media attention on the issue in both countries, Italy and India have well-documented evidence of mafias involved in grabbing land and illegal construction, while much less evidence is available for entire continents—the case of Africa. What is also less well understood when it comes to land and housing crime is that it goes beyond pure greed and places criminal groups in positions of power at the local level, be it through corrupt linkages to politics or through their role as local authoritarian figures governing many aspects of life in marginalized communities.

The example of Rio de Janeiro's feared militias shows the convergence of security and housing problems usually considered in isolation by policymaking departments. Militias emerged out of the demand for security and housing among low-income communities, especially recent migrants seeking jobs in Brazil's second-largest city. Between 1950 and 2000, for example, the population of the towns surrounding Rio's north and northwest areas expanded by 688 percent, much of it informal.[42] The precarious conditions led to demand for informal or corrupt political actors to provide solutions by offering urban infrastructure and public transportation (such as unlicensed vans) in exchange for votes.[43] One such service in high demand was security, as this urban expansion took place at the same time as the drug gangs tied to cocaine trafficking were taking off. The militias evolved from local security rackets and evolved into profitable criminal businesses, especially land grabbing and illegal construction, leading to local authoritarian regimes and precarious living, including building collapses that killed dozens.[44] Such is the level of militias' involvement in the entire chain of urban development in poorly regulated areas of Rio—from grabbing of protected forested areas to illegal construction, sale of property, and control of service delivery to the population—that scholars have coined the term "militia-authored urbanism" to describe it.[45]

Assessments of organized crime in land and property in Africa, for instance, estimate that these issues are "probably the principal founts of power (economic, political and social) for organized criminal networks." On top of the significant impact on urban dwellers that are evicted or sold substandard housing and on lost state tax revenue, criminal land grabs are "welded together" to criminal involvement in urban infrastructure for water, sewage, and transportation, to mention just a few.[46] Although the evidence base varies wildly from country to country, in Kenya this has led to widespread practices of land grabbing in cities by shadowy networks with corrupt ties to powerful individuals, aided by exclusionary and opaque land governance and housing shortfall.[47] The resulting housing stock created by these corrupt mafia-like structures is low-quality, leading (similarly to the Brazil case) to multiple building collapses.[48] Kenya's National Crime Research Centre has documented several modalities of land and housing crimes, including bribery of local officials, false advertisements to lure clients, pollution by dumping waste, and illegal and corrupt arrangements to provide water, sewage, and rubbish collection.[49]

These examples from Africa and Latin America just scratch the surface of how organized crime lodges itself into urban land and housing markets in ways that defy siloed policy responses. This is also more than a single-market criminality, as control over urban land paves the way for ecosystems of illegal economies and local authority over the population. Residents who buy houses through mafia or militia groups end up dependent on them for service provision and security, as they are usually left out of formal government and legal processes. In Rio, for instance, residents who found out their houses had been built in flood-prone areas had limited options to sell and could not complain to local authorities, who were aligned with the militias.[50] These types of conundrums illustrate the intertwining of urban security and governance issues, requiring new ways of collaborating between policymakers and civil society. The options to respond to such challenges are the topic of the next section.

Incomplete Responses and Promising Approaches

The urban development community is well aware of the existence of conflicts around urban land tenure, expansion, or renewal, but the lack of specific mention of armed actors such as gangs, mafias, militias, or rebel groups by urban-focused policymakers, planners, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicates these issues are considered someone else's problem. This is not to say that these complex challenges should fall entirely on the lap of local governments, planners, and urban development NGOs. Rather, the examples above indicate that the problem is multidimensional, with solutions involving land and housing policies alongside security policies, peacebuilding, governance reforms, and violence-prevention interventions.

The danger of treating housing as completely separate from security issues is illustrated by an episode that happened with me: Members of the Brazilian Ministry of Cities approached me during the 2010s, when I was working on violence prevention in Latin American cities, to seek advice for one of the Workers Party's flagship policies at the time, the housing program called My House, My Life (Minha Casa Minha Vida). The program was successful in many senses, delivering houses or apartments for 10 million low-income Brazilians between 2009 and 2016.[51] Despite being carefully planned in structural, financial, and social development terms, the program soon discovered it had overlooked the role of organized crime. Whereas low-income urban areas were also the ones most in need of housing investment, they were also the areas where criminal organizations were most active, and they quickly stepped in to expel the legitimate owners to resell the properties. By 2015, there were reports of similar situations in 16 Brazilian states.[52]

This example shows the importance of considering matters of public security alongside planning and housing policies, but currently the two are siloed. As an article in Land Use Policy journal has stated, the political economy of land dispossession is much more complex than neoliberal capitalist forces and state-led evictions (which are analyzed much more frequently by urban experts) and includes corruption, land mafias, and other powerful actors.[53] Many studies cover

dispossession and displacement in urban areas, but these tend to be examined in terms of gentrification, neoliberal market processes, and major development projects. In the words of one author writing on militias in Medellín, Colombia, "the commodification of popular living spaces are not confined to urban renewal or integration policies, and include actors acting outside formal circuits."[54] Two leading scholars on Italian mafia involvement in urban land markets echo this sense, observing that approaches to urban governance adopt a "positivistic view" that quietly dismisses criminal and violent practices as "insignificant anomalies."[55] These apparently petty biases and preferences of bureaucratic agencies and technical professionals have a massive impact on likely millions of vulnerable urban dwellers worldwide and therefore should concern housing and land policies alongside the security and criminal justice sectors, preferably together.

An exception to the siloed-approaches problem greatly strengthens the point that urban development and governance can be and indeed have been applied in conjunction with peace and security programs. In postconflict settings, UN-Habitat and humanitarian agencies have increasingly encountered the problem of weakened land tenure, fragile urban governance institutions, and the urgency of addressing conflicted claims to land and housing among internally displaced persons, returnees, and rival socio-ethnic groups. The Syria conflict, part of a recent trend toward increasing overlap between armed conflict and cities,[56] has led multilateral agencies to publish best practices for urban infrastructure and housing recovery as part of an "Urban Recovery Framework." The document recognizes, for instance, that "resolving HLP grievances and addressing HLP risks will be decisive for return and reintegration prospects," which lead to approaches such as conducting conflict-sensitivity and risk-analysis assessments to embed housing and land-conflict concerns into reconstruction.[57] This is important because, as Alhakam Shaar argues in the case of Aleppo, the Syrian regime over the years used housing permits as political tools by withholding permits for certain groups and rewarding regime supporters, thus weaving urban housing into the structural issues that postconflict peacebuilding cannot afford to ignore.[58]

This has been part of a shift in humanitarian practice in the past ten years that increasingly recognizes the link between urbanization and armed conflict, with agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) calling on responders to acknowledge the interconnected character of urban services. For instance, damage to houses or linked services such as water or electricity leads to "brain drain" as people seek shelter elsewhere, leading to shortages of doctors in hospitals and other essential services.[59] UN agencies have also used urban profiling to provide "holistic documentation" of needs for urban populations, including recently displaced communities, to identify opportunities for multisectorial interventions.[60]

The humanitarian community's growing attention to housing came as a gradual recognition by agencies responding on the ground, and the ICRC had a prominent role in that with its War in Cities campaign launched in 2016.[61] But the responses framework is relatively underdeveloped in contexts outside of armed conflict or postconflict displacement settings. For instance, in Latin America there is recognition of the role of organized crime in evictions and land grab among displacement experts, but the availability of documented policy solutions and best practices is thin.[62] Part of the problem is that approaches to organized crime (not just in Latin America but across the Global South) have been traditionally considered a police problem, and in recent years government responses have become increasingly militarized and incarceration-based in places such as El Salvador (which has inspired supporters in other Latin American countries). Despite this, there is still a strong sense among experts and practitioners in the violence-prevention field that institutional and governance improvements are key to promote public security in a holistic way—and housing and land are key components of any peaceful society.[63]

Whereas the humanitarian and postconflict-recovery communities of practice have pioneered specific solutions, broader evidence applicable to a wider set of cities and countries affected by organized crime or more slow-burning community conflicts are still lacking. The lack of a common pool of lessons, evidence, best practices, and policy debate hampers

collaboration and cross-country (and cross-city) learning and innovation in policies to prevent or reduce crime and conflict around urban land and housing.

Further evidence could also help to unveil the specific vulnerabilities of historically vulnerable groups, such as women and the LGBTQ+ community. Households led by single mothers, for example, may face additional and urgent risks in cases of forced eviction, as homelessness comes with additional vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation and abuse by male-dominated state structures.

Land-conflict debates in general lack not only the focus on violent actors but also on cities. The International Land Coalition, for example, has produced a wonderful, 40-page toolkit on "effective actions against land grabbing" that nevertheless does not once mention the words "urban," "city," or even "town." The latter is particularly surprising given that towns serve important roles as market hubs for agricultural economies.[64] The coalition's interactive "land matrix," comprising "7,117 concluded deals, covering over 50 million hectares of land," has already been criticized for not even mentioning urban land acquisitions.[65] In summary, the policy challenge of violent actors disrupting urban land and housing markets has been severely lacking in international collaboration, learning, and even data collection. The following section lays out promising approaches inspired by existing policies that are sector-specific and usually lack reference to the actors behind predatory urbanization but that can be adapted to move the debate forward.

Promising Approaches

Although specific approaches targeting armed groups, mafias, or other predatory actors (in conjunction with urban land and housing governance and development) are rare, various policy or civil-society initiatives have addressed closely related issues, such as illegal construction, land registration, transparency in land deals, prevention of land grabs, and corruption. A table with specific examples of practices is included below, though many cases lack explicit reference to the contexts with armed groups or mafias (which the table addresses partially with suggested adaptations).

Oversight and accountability measures against illegal construction

The experience of Italy has illustrated the many challenges in preventing or reducing widespread corruption and laissez-faire approaches to illegal building practices. The policy of condono, or pardons for illegally constructed buildings, was implemented in 1985 as an extraordinary measure, but "tacit agreement" between building firms and local officials led to continued practices to circumvent regulations.[66] This led to more pardons in following decades. One of the flaws with this approach is that the pardons were supposed to be followed up by municipal programs to rehabilitate and provide infrastructure to affected areas, but financial incentives fell short of the costs involved, and smaller municipalities lacked qualified technical staff.[67]

Experts have suggested that a potential way to address the problem of tacit agreement—or simply corruption—is for prosecutors at national and regional levels to increase their oversight over local building practices,[68] which would probably work best if done in partnership with local planning authorities. The lack of qualified technical professionals in smaller municipalities points to the need for partnerships—either between municipalities or between them and national government and potentially NGOs with technical expertise through, for example, task forces to identify and map areas most affected by illegal construction and "urban upgrading" policies—to address them. Another potential solution cited in the literature focuses on civil society: In the small town of Sarno, in Campania, residents set up festivals to promote community spirit while joining forces to renovate some public spaces such as farmsteads and children's playgrounds.[69]

Electronic imagery and machine learning techniques

The availability of data is obviously an important element to designing solutions to illegal buildings. One technique being discussed is the use of satellite imagery to observe construction activity over time, which planners and other local

authorities can use to identify unauthorized construction.[70] A potentially even more accurate technique involves aerial drones equipped with high-resolution cameras, which can identify patterns such as roofs used by illegal builders, though such patterns vary according to social contexts and need to be adapted to new localities. In Taiwan, this approach has been tested alongside deep learning algorithms known as convolutional neural networks to speed up image evaluation for signs of illegal roofing practices, leading to 96 percent accuracy in a test.[71]

Such technology-based approaches, while promising for aiding with the technical challenges of acquiring concrete evidence, have the drawback of not being able to do much against the deep-rooted political dynamics on the ground. In many Global South (and some northern settings such as Italy), responses to illegal building are not so much hampered by lack of knowledge of where they take place but by the sheer power or violence wielded by armed groups or mafias, or by corrupt tacit agreement as discussed above. But machine learning and high-resolution aerial or satellite imagery can be a powerful aide for acquiring evidence that supports deeper interventions that address urban governance and institutional approaches.

Community-based organizations and residents have had a demonstrated role in helping build data in informal settlements, where simple maps can be challenging to come by given the areas' informal and constantly evolving character. Kibera, in Nairobi, is one such community. There a group of young residents initiatiated the Map Kibera project, based on community-led data collection that was later recognized as having increased trust among members of a historically marginalized community.[72] NGOs in Brazil have also developed guidelines for informal settlement residents across the country to conduct "popular mapping," described as a "political act" that furthers the fight for better policies and protection of rights.[73]

Tackling corruption in land markets

Although not always addressing issues of mafia and organized criminal groups explicitly, think tanks such as Transparency International (TI) have collected best practices to tackle corruption in urban land and housing. As implied in its name, TI emphasizes transparency and accountability in land registries and municipal administration of land regulations and practices. Local and national governments should work to close regulatory gaps in case of old or complex laws governing land acquisition, including harmonizing them with environmental regulations to avoid contradictions. Another recommendation is making information widely accessible, especially for civil society groups to monitor decision-making and planning processes, accompanied by integrity risk assessment of the land sector that can reveal compliance loopholes where further anticorruption controls can be built specifically with land markets in sight.[74]

Addressing land issues, whether related to corruption or broader disputes, also intertwines with justice and dispute-resolution mechanisms. The case of Somalia's al-Shabaab courts above illustrates how important land-dispute resolution and perceived corruption are for political stability. In fact, land disputes tend to "constitute a disproportionately high percentage of court cases" in low-income countries.[75] Recommendations to solve slow or inefficient land justice systems involve better training judges and prosecutors in land-tenure matters, establishing specialized courts for land cases, and forming task forces by hiring retired judges to clear cases backlog.[76]

Addressing housing, land, and property rights in situations of displacement

As mentioned above, multilateral organizations such as the ICRC and UN-Habitat have greatly increased their focus on HLP rights issues in situations of displacement, especially those transitioning from armed conflict. Although these examples tend to be tailored to a specific set of contexts affected by civil or interstate wars, many lessons and programs carry potential applicability for other contexts.

One overarching finding is that local governments are crucial actors to map urban land and housing issues and to coordinate solutions—but they are sometimes left out of humanitarian or aid projects designed with national authorities in mind. Therefore, "local governments and traditional authorities should be capacitated and supported in their role"

of mediating land disputes, enforcing property laws, and providing associated public services.[77] This finding logically indicates the potential for nonstatutory mediation processes—dispute-resolution mechanisms mediated by a neutral third party without having to resort to the formal justice system—supported by local governments and operationalized by civil society organizations.

More-specific recommendations include facilitating access of displaced populations to services that tend to be difficult for those without formal or permanent housing, including legal advice, credit, and protection against eviction—especially for women, who are particularly vulnerable to exclusionary practices in male-dominated bureaucracies.[78]

H2 Policy Options to Address Predatory Urbanization

Promising approach	Originating policy area	Application for predatory urbanization contexts	Further adaptation needed
Forming transitional justice mechanisms or specialized courts to clear backlog of HLP cases (an example is the UN-facilitated property restitution agencies in Kosovo after the 1998–99 war).[79]	Land dispute resolution	Can help provide legal clarity for those evicted or deceived by predatory groups.	Addressing obstacles to enforcement (armed groups or mafias likely to resist).
Simplifying laws and closing regulatory loopholes in land markets.[80]	Anticorruption	Can dissuade and reduce leeway for corrupt manipulation of legal loopholes.	Approach can be highly effective in tackling elite corruption, but requires political will; implies problems in enforcement in areas affected by violent mafias.
Reform or creation of well-funded public institutions responsible for formalizing property ownership (such as the commission for the formalization of informal properties in Peru).[81]	Insecurity of tenure	Strong institutions dedicated to HLP can have the technical knowledge and political capital to galvanize cooperation between departments, including policing, justice, and other security mechanisms in HLP policies.	Strong local institutions should be accompanied by a more explicit focus on reducing or preventing predatory actors such as mafias or militias from undermining HLP in marginalized urban areas.

Providing collective land titles to communities (instead of individuals), informed by traditional land uses (such as the Baan Mankong program in Thailand, which issued collective land titles in consultation with communities, leading to increased homeowner investment).[82]	Insecurity of tenure	Can provide land titles in contexts where informal land ownership is difficult to reconcile with modern legal tenure.	Collective ownership may still be vulnerable to land grab or evictions by violent actors.
Area-based assessments and urban profiles of needs of specific neighborhoods or towns (implemented by UN-Habitat in several Syrian cities given the civil war's comprehensive damage across the urban system).[83]	Urban displacement	Can reveal complex interlinkages of urban governance and security needs in specific areas.	Without collaboration between urban experts and security authorities, urban profiles may lack solutions to predatory actors' presence.
Planning (and building) urban extensions to cities to accommodate inflows of migrants or displaced populations (as done by local and international partners in Somaliland).[84]	Urban displacement	Building essentially new (if small) settlements close to large cities can take communities away from areas under control of armed groups or mafias while keeping communities within commuting distance to jobs in cities.	Building "extensions" or new areas may be more feasible in situations of (temporary) displacement than in massive informal settlements; rule of law and institutions in new areas are essential to guarantee predatory actors don't migrate alongside residents.
Consultations among community leaders, NGOs, and residents' associations to discuss alternatives to eviction from informal housing, potentially including government actors.[85]	Insecurity of tenure	Civil society actors contain a wealth of granular information on predatory groups' activities and may help governments develop feasible policies to formalize tenure, avoid evictions, and—if done in collaboration with security authorities—weaken armed groups' territorial control.	Governments have adopted siloed approaches, especially because agencies responsible for public security and land tenure rarely talk to each other; discretion during dialogues is necessary to protect participants from retaliation.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued for a more consistent approach and unified language to identify deliberate action by organized groups to evict, grab land, illegally build, and conduct violence related to housing or land in cities. The current approach by governments, civil society, NGOs, and the expert communities is extremely fragmented, with similar challenges being addressed in completely separate ways—and with potentially useful solutions being completely ignored because of policy siloes. The chapter has suggested the conceptual framework of predatory urbanization to designate varied instances of predatory actors in contexts affected by armed conflict, intercommunal conflict, and organized crime. It has defined it as sustained action by organized groups to grab land, evict residents, seize houses, illegally build, or corrupt planning processes in cities, through use or threat of violence. This derives from a concrete sense of policy confusion and oversight, illustrated above by examples such as naming confusion of India's land "mafias" or lack of security-development collaboration in Brazil's housing program.

The scarcity of research on these issues hampers progress on solutions. As the chapter has frequently emphasized, communities of practice and policymakers lack a common language to discuss issues such as intercommunal conflicts around land, illegal construction, corruption, and gang-driven evictions alongside urban planning and development. More research on predatory urbanization through academia, think tanks, and NGOs can highlight points in common between different policy areas and geographies that currently work separately.

The chapter has also highlighted the effect of predatory urbanization in local shifts toward authoritarianism, in which militias, mafias, gangs, or corrupt political figures undermine the urbanity or plurality of cities. Militias in Rio de Janeiro or Nairobi have strengthened their control by using grievances around land tenure or housing scarcity to claim to be community protectors. Writing on Karachi, Laurent Gayer describes how the desire among some sectors for a cosmopolitan spirit for Pakistan's largest city was marred by ethnic militias and mafias clashing over land, drugs, and arms.[86] In the Global North, economically developed countries such as Italy see mafias and corrupt networks influence urban development and public spaces that are on paper the remit of public democratic processes. Tackling predatory urbanization is therefore a critical step to achieve not only safer but more politically stable and responsive cities.

The chapter's second part identified challenges and approaches to tackle predatory urbanization. Some of the most promising approaches are:

- Simplifying laws and closing regulatory loopholes in land markets.
- Reforming or creating public agencies tasked with formalizing property ownership.
- Issuing collective land titles to communities, which can increase residents' tenure security and investment in their buildings and communities.
- Developing area-based assessments and urban profiles that integrate housing needs with other areas, such as infrastructure bottlenecks, basic service provision, and public security issues like criminal violence.
- Establishing regular and institutionalized community consultation mechanisms on land tenure and codevelopment of alternatives to eviction between governments, civil society, and law enforcement.

One overarching challenge is the strongly different cultures of urban development (broadly conceived) and public security communities of practice. For instance, security policies have often defaulted to incarceration- and eviction-based approaches, with repressive antigang policies in Central America currently gaining particular momentum following mass incarceration policies in El Salvador.[87] It is certainly a challenge in some contexts to bring these two massively different

worlds together into a cooperative approach. Hence the importance of increasing the evidence base and harmonizing definitions for civil society, journalists, national policymakers, and local authorities to monitor, discuss, and devise solutions through global or regional cooperation frameworks. City networks can help break these silos.

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IN OUR CITIES

About Peace in Our Cities

Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) is a unique global network of over 30 cities and more than 50 community-based and international partners.

PiOC seeks to reduce and prevent urban violence worldwide—preserving lives and helping cities thrive. It does so by creating concrete, participatory, and evidence-based platform exchanges to reduce and prevent severe violence in member cities, while also building a global movement of urban-violence-reduction advocates.

The PiOC approach is based on three lines of action:

- **Amplify** policymaker awareness of the genuine scope and scale of urban violence and opportunities available to help cities address it.
- **Advance** evidence-informed, balanced policy solutions and peacebuilding approaches to reduce the most severe forms of violence in urban contexts.
- **Accompany** city leaders, community partners, and civil society through peer exchanges and information access to realize ambitious targets for violence reduction.

Peace in Our Cities is co-facilitated by Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies at New York University's Center on International Cooperation; the Stanley Center for Peace and Security; Co-founder and Principal, Rachel Locke; and Expert Advisor and Membership Liaison, Flavia Carbonari. To learn more, donate, or join, please contact info@peaceinourcities.org or visit www.peaceinourcities.org.