

Strengthening Resilience in Fragile Cities

While all cities are different, some are more successful than others. Most of the world's 1,000 large and intermediate cities are driving global growth and innovation. There are hundreds of others, however, that lack the institutional capacity to bounce back from shocks and stresses. In extreme cases, these fragile cities threaten not only their residents but also their countries and regions. Urban fragility is not inevitable. Both the public and private sector have critical roles to build resilience in these settings. Awareness of how cities succumb to fragility and lack of resilience is the first essential step.



Preparing for the urban age

Twenty-first century security and sustainable development will be decided not in nation states but in their large, medium, and smaller-sized cities.¹ The reason for this is straightforward: most people in the coming decades are moving to the metropolis. Notwithstanding global fascination with megalopolises, super-cities and megacities with populations of 10 million inhabitants or more, intermediate urban centres with about 500,000 people are growing at the fastest rates.

The scale and speed of global urban population growth is breathtaking. Urban populations are currently growing at 1.8%, amounting to between 65 and 70 million new city dwellers a year. The vast majority of population expansion is in the so-called Global South. It is people in Africa, the Middle East, and – in particular – Asia who will be moving to cities in huge numbers over the coming decades.² These trends in urbanization, and their implications for security and welfare, are recognized by diplomatic, defence and development specialists alike.

¹ For a review of how some cities are struggling see Muggah's TED talk at https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_muggah_how_to_protect_fast_growing_cities_from_failing?language=en and his article in Foreign Affairs at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2015-01-15/fixing-fragile-cities>. The United Nations University and World Bank are also leading a new investigation of fragile and resilient cities.

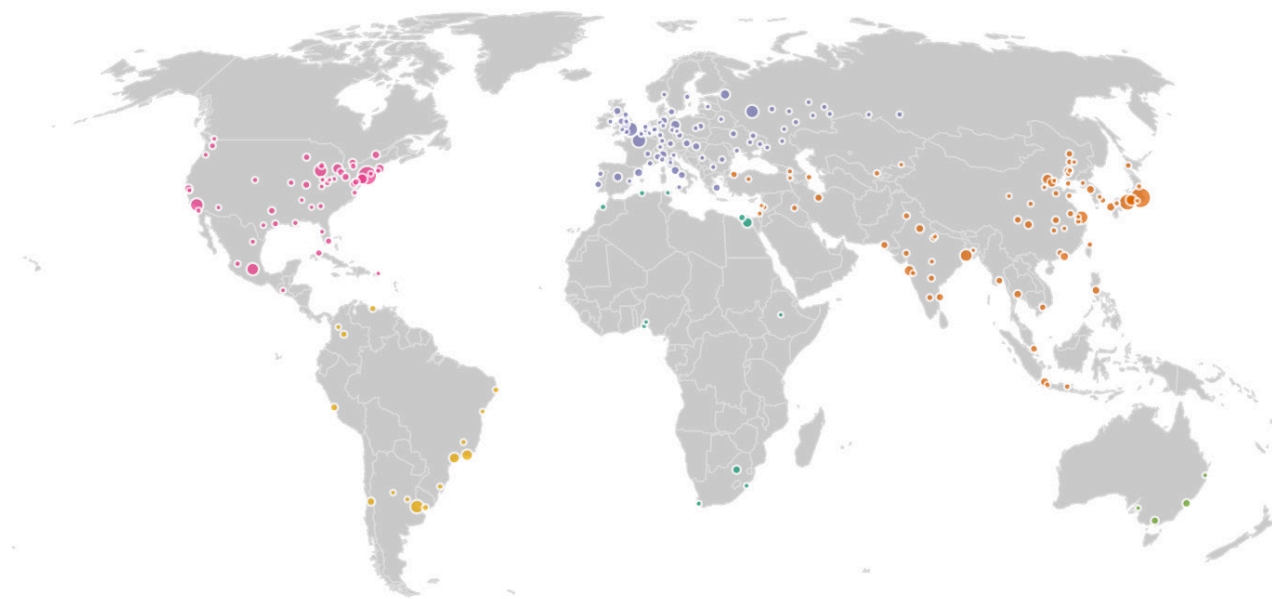
² Nigeria will add 212 million new city residents, China another 292 million urban dwellers, and India some 404 million inhabitants.

Distribution of cities of over 500,000 people in 2015

Source: <http://www.iied.org/cities-interactive-data-visual>



Hover over a city for details



This draws its statistics for 1950 to 2030 from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2014), *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision*, and from Chandler, Tertius (1987), *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lampeter, UK, 656 pages for statistics from 1800 to 1900.

Not all cities are moving in the same direction. To be sure, some of them are doing remarkably well; just 600 cities are now estimated to account for two-thirds of global GDP.³ While a handful of the world's 28 megacities are thriving and alliances of predominantly wealthy cities are learning from one another, others are falling dangerously behind. There are at least 1,000 cities of over 500,000 people in 2015⁴ and in some of the more fragile cities the social contract binding municipal governments and citizens is crumbling.

What makes cities fragile?

Urban fragility occurs at the intersection of poverty, weak governance, violence and disaster. Whether national, subnational or municipal scale, the fragility is a consequence of an accumulation of risks. As a process, fragility occurs when local institutions are unable to cope with and adapt to stress. Fragility can occur rapidly, in the wake of armed conflict or natural disaster (i.e. a shock). It can also emerge more incrementally, expressed in the deterioration of governance, services, depletion of natural resources and overall safety and security (i.e. stress). Often these long-term stresses can aggravate the impact of a sudden shock.

Fragility frequently arises in environments characterized by high rates of urban poverty and inequality. The political, social and economic divide between the wealthy and poor is frequently reproduced spatially in cities.⁵ There are currently 3.9 billion city residents, of which 1 billion are in slums. Indeed, 110 million of Latin America's 558 million residents live in informal settlements. Many of them are confronted with accumulated risks, including low-quality policing, services and housing, limited access to basic utilities and services, and physical and spatial segregation and fragmentation.

Fragility and resilience can be visualized on a continuum. City institutions can experience shifts in institutional legitimacy and capability across time and space (higher fragility and lower resilience). Sudden shocks – including dramatic changes in basic food prices or floods and earthquakes – can result in instability. Equally, there are examples of unstable settings shifting from situations of acute instability to a new equilibrium of stability (lower fragility and higher resilience). Most cities fall somewhere in between these extremes.

There are several factors giving rise to a heightened risk of fragility in cities. These include high rates of income and social inequality, rapid unregulated urbanization, large bulges of under-educated and unemployed youth, poor quality security and justice services, high rates of crime and violence, and exposure to climate change risks and coastal areas. Other factors include weak social cohesion, persistent corruption, low foreign and domestic investment, capital flight, population displacement and vulnerability to other disaster risks. The extent to which these factors are reversed also expresses a city's real and relative resilience.

How can urban resilience be strengthened?

City planners, civil society leaders and the private sector are exploring ways to reverse fragility and promote resilience. Cities like Bogotá, Medellín, Rio de Janeiro, alongside New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles have made a remarkable turnaround in recent years. These changes did not come about by accident but as a result of the leadership of mayors and private actors together with focused and adequately resourced strategies emphasizing prevention, risk reduction and resilience promotion. A key area of focus has been on identifying and then resourcing improvements in institutional legitimacy and capabilities.

³ Richard Dobbs et al., "Urban World: Mapping the Economic Power of Cities," McKinsey & Company, March 2011, http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/urbanization/urban_world.

⁴ See <http://www.demographia.com/db-worldua.pdf> for a review of over 1,009 cities.

⁵ See, for example, the world of Rodgers and Jones on "infrastructural violence" at <http://eth.sagepub.com/content/13/4/401.abstract>.

There are a host of factors that contribute to reversing fragility. These may not necessarily be the reverse of the structural factors associated with fragility. Indeed, some cities have managed to strengthen the capabilities and legitimacy of institutions despite moderate to high rates of violence, unemployment, urbanization and vulnerability to natural disasters. For example, city authorities in Latin America have designed out crime using innovative urban planning techniques. In Western Europe and South East Asia, municipalities are beginning to develop governance, early warning and infrastructural systems to reduce exposure to coastal flooding. All cities have differentiated abilities to resist varied forms of shocks and stresses over time and space. While a focus on mitigating structural risk factors is necessary, it may not necessarily always be sufficient to promote urban resilience.

There are clearly important investments required across a range of sectors. A precondition is investment in safety, health and well-being. Efforts to reduce violence, promote meaningful employment and ensure access to basic services are equally critical. Another fundamental area of investment is in functional infrastructure and environmental improvements. Reliable public transport, adequate communications coverage, social services for vulnerable populations and risk mitigation are all critical strategies to strengthening urban resilience.

Additional areas that require intensive focus are in relation to urban governance, social and economic management and leadership and strategy. Cities that are capable of generating a satisfactory tax-take, guarantee property rights, cultivate neighbourhood representation and sustain financing (including contingency funds) tend to be more successful. Likewise, sustained public leadership, robust city councils and legislatures, adequate mechanisms for consultation with citizens and the private sector and annual strategic planning and budgetary capacities are all health indicators of a resilient city.

Objectives of the Global Agenda Council

- **Facilitate dialogues** between key stakeholders, including leading mayors, business leaders and safe city advocates. Sharing information on what works (and what does not) to reduce fragility and promote resilience is essential.
- **Raise awareness** about ways to reverse urban fragility and strengthen resilience, including through use of new technologies. The creation of interactive dashboards and visualizations is key.
- **Identify practical entry points** for private sector actors to build resilience in fragile cities, especially through profitable and low-cost investments to enable employment and inclusive economic growth.
- **Create the enabling conditions for businesses to invest and engage responsibly**, to mitigate risks of increasing fragility and to increase the potential for progress towards greater resilience.
- **Support solutions-driven programmes** in humanitarian and development agencies that focus on fragile cities and urban resilience, in particular at the World Humanitarian Summit.

Activities of the Global Agenda Council

- **Advocate the importance** of strengthening resilience in fragile cities at **global and World Economic Forum meetings and the media**.
- Create **synergies and side events in partnership with Global Agenda Councils** on Risk & Resilience, the Future of Cities, and Future of Real Estate & Urbanization.
- Launch a **special series with the *Guardian* newspaper** that profiles leaders who are working in fragile cities and building urban resilience, as well as regular op-eds in news outlets of the Global South.
- Prepare an **online data visualization** identifying the distribution of fragile cities/resilient cities around the world according to predefined metrics.

Events in focus

- World Economic Forum on Latin America**, Riviera Maya, Mexico, 6-8 May 2015
- Institute for Security Studies seminar**, Pretoria, South Africa, 8 June 2015
- Scandinavian Cities and Infrastructure Forum**, Stockholm, Sweden, September 2015
- Summit on the Global Agenda 2015**, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 25-27 October
- World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2016**, Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, January
- World Bank Fragility, Violence and Conflict Forum**, Washington, D.C., 1-3 March 2016
- Global Parliament of Mayors**, London, UK, April (date tbc)
- World Humanitarian Summit**, Istanbul, Turkey, 26-27 May 2016
- Habitat III Conference**, Quito, Ecuador, October 2016

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