



From Fragile States to Fragile Cities: Redefining Spaces of Humanitarian Practices

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Abstract

There are widespread claims that cities are becoming places of growing violence and that as a result, some cities, or zones within urban areas, can be treated as conflict zones. This article traces some of the discursive and conceptual shifts involved in the defining the city as a new frontier for international humanitarian action, especially in endemic violence that characterize ‘non-war situations’. A number of scholars, policy analysts and consultants are examining the ways rising numbers of violent deaths in cities are threatening political stability and development initiatives. Following on from other academic contributions, this article considers how cities are being represented as humanitarian spaces with related concepts of ‘failure’ and ‘fragility’. This re-scaling enables a de-coupling of the urban conflicts from the difficult terrain of statebuilding and allows the circumventing of legitimacy and sovereignty gaps that at the center of the current crisis of the humanitarian regime.

¹ The author would like to thank the invaluable support of the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada for the project of which this paper is part of. I also thank the generous grants from the Brazilian Council for Scientific Research (CNPQ) and the State Foundation for Scientific Research (FAPERJ) that make this research possible. I would also like to thank Nick Onuf, Jef Huysmans, Didier Bigo, Martin Coward, Paulo Esteves, Isabel Siqueira, Bruno Borges, Robert Muggah and Monica Herz, for their generous and constructive insights and comments.

States, Cities, Humanitarian Spaces

Cities have attracted increased attention from international scholars in the past decade. Influenced by contributions of urban sociologists, works on many new subjects of research in the field began to consider the emergence of new phenomena, such as the global city, as a sign of fundamental changes in the fabric of world politics. (Curtis 2011) While an important part of the literature considered the rise of global cities as hubs for the production and circulation of investment, services, finance, technology, knowledge in the expanding spaces of the global economy, many analysts looked at the new social contradictions and conflicts generated by these new processes. The deepening economic integration of these zones was, the latter argued, achieved through the exploitation of low paid work, uneven access to services, growing income inequalities and the privatization of policy networks. These trends weakened the cohesion of urban spaces, creating fragmentation and polarization of their social fabric and, for some, reduced the ability of states to regulate transnational flows and urbanization within their borders. (Norton 2003; Brenner 2004; Brenner and Schmid 2014) Our concern in this article is directed at the claim that cities have become places of growing violence and that as a result, some cities, or zones within urban areas, can be treated as conflict zones. We are especially interested in the discursive and conceptual shifts involved in the defining the city as a new frontier for international humanitarian action, especially in endemic violence that characterize 'non-war situations'. This move is accompanied by a number of analysis by scholars, policy analysts and consultants that see the rising numbers of violent deaths in cities as an increasing threat to political stability and development projects as well as identifying these "fragile cities and their urban peripheries [as] sites for the future wars of the current century." (Muggah 2012) We will see that in order to represent cities as humanitarian spaces concepts of 'failure' and 'fragility' have been often applied to the urban realm. We argue that this re-scaling enables a de-coupling of the urban conflicts from the difficult terrain of statebuilding and allows the circumventing of legitimacy and sovereignty gaps that are at the center of the current crisis of the humanitarian regime.

Humanitarian spaces are basically protected areas under different levels of international responsibility and authority. They range from conventional practices enabled by international humanitarian law in the context of interstate wars, to safe havens in situations of serious risk to human rights or state collapse. The expansion humanitarian spaces was the hallmark of the 1990's, when the critique of the sovereign state -- particularly less developed ones -- questioned their ability and legitimacy to face the transformations, opportunities and threats brought by globalization. The constitution of humanitarian spaces that transcend the authority of the state was the result of the claim, by international organizations, western states and global civil society agents that humanitarian law and universal human rights trumped the rule of sovereignty when

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violent conflicts threatened the lives or physical integrity of a great number of innocent civilians (or non-combatants). The use of military force could be legitimized in the name of humanitarian emergencies. Many conflicts in the post-Cold War era presented this particular trait. The literature on the subject called them “new wars” or “wars of the third kind”. (Holsti 1996; Kaldor 2006) These conflicts differed from conventional wars in the sense that they involved non-state actors and irregular forces, were not confined to a single territorial state, and the organization and use of violence was frequently characterized as war crimes or crimes against humanity. The new wars are usually protracted low intensity conflicts with strong ideological or ethnic motivations, and for this reason were defined by Kaldor as wars of “identity”.

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In the past two decades, these ‘new’ conflicts became the predominant form of warfare in the post-cold war era. The main causes for the emergence of the new threats to international security were attributed to the inability of certain states to provide essential public goods to their populations, especially security from external and internal violence. The constitution of humanitarian spaces reflected new practices associated to the displacement of authority from the state to the international community, as well as a normative shift in the accepted principles of legitimation and recognition of sovereign states. As a consequence, analysts have considered humanitarian spaces as a challenge -- even if allegedly transitory -- to the control of the state over its territory and population. (Yamashita 2004; Elden 2006) While these spaces have taken different forms in the past decade, their political nature is still a hybrid of internationally sanctioned acts and state consent and perhaps for this reason they have continued play a central role in the humanitarian regime. The inclusion of urban spaces, or cities, in a general framework of humanitarian spaces that includes a variety of ‘ungoverned spaces’ represents an important development in the continuous efforts to redefine the rule of sovereignty in the name of universal humanitarian norms as well as in strategies of statebuilding. In fact, the production of humanitarian spaces has been a central strategy in the construction of liberal governance after the Cold War and such spaces have multiplied since the establishment of safe areas in northern Iraq after the first Gulf War and the 1992 intervention in Somalia.

The fragility of the post-colonial and post-socialist states is the basis for the analysis of wide array of conflicts of the new kind. These states are considered lacking in institutional strength to exercise the monopoly of the use of violence to impose order. They also lack many other attributes of statehood indispensable to secure the welfare of its populations and sustain the idea of national communities. They are ‘failed’ or ‘fragile’ states. (Jackson 1990). Despite the considerable amount of writings on the subject since the 1990s it is still unclear whether failed or fragile state are the cause of the new type of contemporary security threats or the result of the conflicts they supposedly generate.

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The focus on statebuilding as an indispensable strategy to stabilize and bring peace to conflict ridden countries expressed a new consensus that the peacebuilding model of the 1990s was not effective and sustainable. The failure of some of the most important operations undertaken during that decade led to the conviction that building solid institutions, combining instruments of development aid and security was the appropriate path to bridge the legitimacy and capability gaps that reproduced state fragility. The integrated mission model brought humanitarian agencies and security forces under a same political purpose and operational framework. Statebuilding had two main objectives: to combine the strengthening of the capacities of state institutions as well as their ties to civil society. The issue of legitimacy was central for those who advocated the security / development agenda, as well as for the now strategic interests of stabilization in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. (Barnett 2010; Duffield 2010; Muggah 2010; Paris 2011)

While the debate over statebuilding broadened the scope of integrated missions, its results on the ground cast serious doubts about the ability of international agents to carry the main responsibilities of reconstructing societies. Moreover, the effectiveness of international humanitarian action became increasingly questionable in protracted violent conflicts in places such as the Congo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The combination of security and aid policies led to the creation of concerns with the life, organization and sustainability of communities. In other words, the focus shifted more and more to the internal aspects of governance and how complex operations could address the challenges of chronic vulnerability which were considered to be at the base of the continuation of violence and fragility. (Duffield 2010; Brock 2012) More than the organization of elections, disarmament and reintegration of security forces into regular police and military corps, the demands now shifted to institutional legitimacy, autonomy and capacity for good governance (Paris and Sisk 2009). The shift appears, for instance, in the 2009 ODI document on the dilemmas and contradictions of statebuilding:

“State-building refers to deliberate actions by national and/or international actors to establish, reform or strengthen state institutions and build state capacity and legitimacy in relation to an effective political process to negotiate mutual demands between state and citizen. State-building is not, therefore, only about the state in isolation – the quality and nature of the relationship linking state and society are also essential”.(Elhawary, Foresti et al. 2010)

The emphasis on the combination of institutional and societal factors gave way, as we shall see ahead, to new lexicon associated to what we could call “third generation” humanitarian operations. The changes can be summarized in three important points: the vocabulary of institutional capacity, human security and aid effectiveness has progressively qualified and circumscribed the previous discussions and diagnostics of

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state failure, collapse and of peacebuilding; b) the new approach seeks more precision in the conceptualization of state weakness, now more generally defined as fragility and articulated to the problem of development in a more technical, measurable approach; c) finally, third generation humanitarian practices seek to displace their focus on the macro-structure of states and their rebuilding and look into regional and local level of communities and cities as sites vulnerable to global risks and as such, in need of more deliberate and focused action from the international community. The general rationale of these tendencies is of an expansion, institutionally and spatially speaking, of humanitarianism or, in Duffield's words, the security / development nexus that today frames the global humanitarian regime. (Duffield 2007) Institutionally, the object of humanitarian action continues to be the state, even if differently characterized in its weakness and defined more in terms of different and more decentralized functions of governance than in terms of the incompleteness of its sovereign statehood. However, the ambition to see through the path to full statehood seems to have receded as a relic of modernization theories and given way to different paths of institutionalization that combine various levels of functional and authoritative provision of public goods, as well as different networks of suppliers --public, private, societal--of such goods. An eloquent expression of the revision of statebuilding goals and practices can be found in the "New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States" initiative by the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, the main focus of which is in the problems of legitimacy, fragility, ownership and effectiveness. The new deal articulates the principles and practices of aid effectiveness, proposed in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and in the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, to the field of humanitarian action.² There is an increasingly pervasive realization in the academic literature and among development and humanitarian agencies that the contradictions of statebuilding have exposed substantive problems in the security / development nexus in the sense that the pursuit of stabilization too often undermines the goals of sustainability and resilience of local actors.

Spatially, the scope of humanitarian action also aims at expansion. While claims to its global reach have been common since the early 90s, the normative limits of international society have consistently hindered the aspirations to redefine the legitimacy and authority of states in light of liberal universalism. In this sense, the representation of humanitarian space in a Kantian framework has been undermined by norms and practices that reinforce the divisions of the international system, returning the primary responsibility to protect to territorial states. (Yamashita 2004; Elden 2006; Chandler 2012) Given the growing perception of an exhaustion of the processes of reconstruction of states, there are significant efforts underway to define urban areas as humanitarian spaces in its own nature. As such, the conflicts and violence that are

² See www.newdeal4peace.org and www.effectivecooperation.org.

intrinsic to modern global cities could now be the object of humanitarian prevention and protection. The concept of 'fragile cities' appears in the operational lexicon of humanitarians enabling new representations of space and new practices capable of facing "the dizzying pace of urbanization...believed to exacerbate fragility in large and intermediate cities."(Muggah 2013)

In the next sections I will argue that the new humanitarian lexicon has been engaged in an effort to constitute cities as humanitarian spaces and to incorporate urban violence as part of the changing landscape of threats to civilian populations that characterizes the post-Cold War conflicts. While the collapse or failure of states were the cause or the result of the new wars of our era, cities and other ungoverned zones of the planet are plagued by intense conflict and violence in "non-war" situations.

Fragile States, Fragile Societies

Fragility normally refers to states lacking legitimacy and effective institutions. The notion of fragile state, as mentioned before, has become more salient in the academic and policy literature as opposed to the more conventional concepts of failed or collapsed states. Some observers state that it has effectively replaced those previous concepts. This tendency was reinforced as more emphasis is placed on the effectiveness of humanitarian action but also reflects the progressive securitization of development policies in the humanitarian space and the need to create "conditions of stability in the developing world". (Hout 2010)

When used in reference to states, fragility is usually defined against the ideal weberian type. Its main characteristics being: the lack of representation and accountability; the lack of stable legal standards and of checks to coercive action by the state; and the inability to control territory and its borders.(Brock 2012) Fragility, however, doesn't only affect the state, it also applies to the economic infrastructure and social cohesion of nations. The divisions, the predatory behavior of elites and the arbitrariness of power that characterize fragile states frequently lead to chronic deficiencies in the workings of the economy and to rivalries among groups that do not identify with a national community. In fact, much of the literature on fragility focuses on the assessment of the risks fragile states may present to regional and international stability, as well as the probability that weaknesses can lead to collapse. In this sense, many definitions of fragility are associated with global threats such as terrorism, transnational crime, illegal migration, violent conflicts, among others. Here fragility is mostly defined as a lack of essential functional attributes of the state. However, in contrast to the failed state, fragile states are not just seen as devoid of capacity and will to perform its basic functions, they are also considered especially vulnerable to external shocks and instabilities.

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(Kaplan 2008; Di John 2010) Indeed, fragility has been progressively defined as a factor of poverty and instability, requiring a broader approach for proper analysis. Not just the basic functions of statehood and overall governance would come under the definition, but the fractures within society and state/society relations. A strong state should be capable of managing or mediating effectively conflicting interests of social groups, acquiring legitimacy in the process. Consequently, state fragility is reflected in the instability of social arrangements, the lack of cohesiveness of the social fabric and, as a result, the potential for violent conflict. (Zoellick 2009)

In contrast to the notion of failure, however, fragility allows for a better analysis of the process and sequence of stages and levels of weakness in a society. A number of indicators of fragility that have recently appeared combine the functions of physical protection, legitimacy, efficient management of the economy, social protection and, as mentioned, territorial control. The recent trajectory of the concept, and of its use, suggests a preference for more objectivity in the attribution of fragility factors, as opposed to the less precise and often subjective concept of failure. (Patrick 2011) In fact, major international development agencies have adopted the language of fragility in the reports and indexes that underscore their performance evaluations of aid recipients. USAID, DFID, The World Bank, OECD, ODI, and academic institutions such as the George Mason University (State Fragility Index) and Oxford University, have been using different definitions of fragility to refer to situations of conflict, instability, development incapacities, poverty and inequality, institutional weakness and poor governance, to name just a few more evident variables of weakness. To be sure, fragility also presents definitional challenges to analysts and policy makers, much as failure or collapse did. However, the concept has a wider scope and flexibility that allows, for instance, assessing fragilities in middle income countries that could hardly ever be categorized as failed (such as China, India and Brazil, for example). (OECD 2012) At the same time, some definitions such as DFID's allow for a range of situations of weakness that includes processes of failure as a possible scenario. Failure or collapse, however, do not condition the analysis of the more general phenomenon of weakness, with all its normative and analytical shortcomings. On the contrary, it is the definition of fragility that frames the analysis of weakness in its different forms. Thus, the different indexes of fragility taken together provide a narrative of the trajectory of weakening statehood as well as an objective depiction of robust (resilient) states and societies that can be taken as referents for policy reform and design. Even though the reference to fragile states is still charged with normative and political overtones, the development of a more neutral concept of fragility enables actors to address context specific situations, as well as particular dimensions of state and societal performance, with preventive measures and strategies to contain the potential negative effects of chronic fragility: terrorism, international crime, rise in local urban violence, drugs and arms trafficking, and so on.

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Moreover, the concept of fragility enables the expansion of its application to conflict zones outside the jurisdiction or control of state authorities, in “pockets of fragility”, such as favelas, rural areas controlled by irregular forces, “ungoverned spaces” or “wild spaces”. When, based on the measurement of certain variables, and when these “pockets of fragility” reach critical mass, “relations between state and society can be considered fragile.” (OECD 2012) Moving further away from the failed states literature, fragility can be applied to middle income countries and mass consumer societies as well. Given the complexity of contemporary interconnected “global strategic nodes” and the possibility of system-failure as a result of catastrophic events, “mass consumer societies begin to appear inherently vulnerable”. (Duffield 2010) On the other hand, as the last report on fragility by the OECD states “nearly half of all fragile states are now classified as middle-income countries, and pockets of fragility can exist in otherwise stable countries.”(OECD 2012) So, the move to fragility, as mentioned before, would seem to sidestep the critique leveled against the discourse of failed states regarding its discriminatory focus and exclusionary effects on developing and underdeveloped countries of the global south. In this sense, to speak of fragility instead of failure should contribute to overcome the resistance of local elites, protective of their sovereignty -- to international efforts to address different sources of instability.

The fragility discourse would then be instrumental to stimulate a greater involvement of local actors in humanitarian and statebuilding missions, in the so-called “new deal” approach. Such an approach reflects the search for a more “substantive concept of fragility that goes beyond a primary focus on the quality of government policies and institutions to include a broader picture of the economy and society” (OECD 2013). The new concept would contemplate three important shifts. First, it seeks to replace the general model of state and peacebuilding prevalent in the previous two decades, privileging context specific responses to the particular socio-political and historical trajectory and diversity of resources of societies in crisis; secondly the new approach consolidates the move towards a focus from states to the people living within them, notably in the human security approach but in this case extended to a broader scope that encompasses humanitarian and development concerns. In other words, the new way to engage fragile states should look beyond building institutions of government and focus more in “multiple dimensions of state-society relations”. Finally, the proposed “thick” conceptualization of fragility seeks to integrate internal factors usually associated to weak states and societies with external shocks against which fragile states are ill prepared to face. This last point coincided with other definitions of fragility that emphasize the vulnerability of certain states to the pressures and flows of globalization. (Patrick 2011)

While much is still made of the inadequateness of state and societal dysfunctions to deal with external and internal threats, the apparent difference of the “new deal”

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approach lies in the incorporation of systemic risks that are not, contrary to the failed states approach, basically dependent upon the willingness and even the capacity of governing elites. Internal and external stress factors are incorporated into a broader framework of complex systemic processes and megatrends that are less amenable to the logic of control and more associated with “forward-looking” prevention measures. In other words, the diagnostics of fragility invites measures to enhance the resilience of social actors in those areas, or “pockets” more vulnerable to external shocks. One of the main characteristics of fragility then, is the distribution of vulnerability in different levels of state and society and its spatial dispersion in ‘zones’ or ‘areas’ more subject to risk. The new approach recognizes that vulnerability is often the result of a more general impact of globalization on state’s capacities to manage transnational flows, and that fragility is a rather complex and variable phenomenon that is not well understood from the perspective of more comprehensive state/society frameworks. To reduce vulnerabilities policies would have to go beyond stabilization and relief and create conditions for ownership, effectiveness, local cooperation and good governance. (Brock 2012) The main challenge becomes then not just how to build cohesive national state structures, but also how to organize domestic administrative structures that could effectively deliver sound policies. In other words, the new approach distanced itself from costly commitments to create strong states through internationally led efforts and emphasized the internalization of the dynamics of reconstruction. In this context, fragility and resilience, instead of weakness and strength, are seen as the “shifting points along a spectrum”, and the focused, context specific, local oriented investment in resilient institutions and social organizations becomes the answer to the search for effectively face risk and vulnerability. (OECD 2013)

The vocabulary of fragility and resilience opens new possibilities for humanitarian action as well as some contradictions. It provides a broader and more pragmatic articulation of security and development because it establishes a more direct relation between social ills (poverty, inequality, representation deficits) in less developed societies and the consequences of fragility (new forms of violence, terrorism, vulnerability to shocks). If fragility impairs development and creates a context of permanent risk, more resilient institutions and social organizations are needed to face the uncertainties of the complex environment of globalization. The replication of the trajectory of the liberal welfare state is, in this perspective, ineffective, once the limitations of such states to deal with complexity have been exposed by the vulnerabilities of advances societies themselves. (Duffield 2010) Consequently, while statebuilding and peacebuilding have been defined by the travails of constructing strong states, the new approach would seem to look at such goal with guarded skepticism. What resilience calls for are institutions capable of mobilizing society to face risk and respond to the inevitable but unpredictable events. Fragility should be addressed by cohesive state/society relations, capable of generating cooperation, partnerships and social responsibility as

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the basis for better governance, more effective aid and more resilience in the face of risk. It becomes, then, impossible to think of fragile states without a proper examination of fragile societies. As stated in the most recent report on the theme by the OECD “fragility is a deep political issue centered on the social contract between state and society, and it requires greater consideration of the role of stress factors (internal and external).” (OECD, 2013) The shift in diagnostics invites new remedies. As agents focus on the vulnerabilities of distinct social settings, consideration of different levels of territorial and political organization become relevant, such as “sub-national pockets of fragility”, “ungoverned spaces” or “no-go zones”. These new spatial configurations of humanitarian space have deserved a great deal of attention from international agencies in the past few years. It is in this context that the urban spaces, cities, have become a prime object of analysis of the economies of risk in fragile societies. As one commentator observes “preoccupation with ‘fragile’ and ‘failed’ cities [...] echoes many of the very same anxieties associated with failed and fragile states.”(Muggah 2013) The next section attempts to frame the issue in light of the previous discussion on fragility.

From states to Cities: the urbanization of humanitarian action

Urban violence is becoming the new frontier of humanitarian action.³ While the number and intensity of actual wars has declined in the past decade, the spread of armed confrontations in cities has increased dramatically and, in many cases, become endemic. The novelty of this kind of violence has been explained as a consequence of rapid urbanization, poor governance, poverty and the increasing vulnerability to risks produced by globalization. Its relevance is stressed due to its sheer impact in terms of number of deaths, dissemination of fear, destruction or disruption of public goods delivery systems. Moreover, these conflicts not only inflict great harm to large numbers of innocent civilians, they are also perceived increasingly as key elements of fragile societies and states. In fact, as discussed in the previous section, the discourse of fragility broadens the scope of the humanitarian approach allowing for the introduction of different spatial and social levels of political administration of security and development within fragile states as objects of concern and intervention. Cities are part of the general breakdown of order, of the “rupture of social contracts [...] and the declining ability to regulate and monopolize legitimate violence [and] the progressive fragmentation of public space”. (Muggah 2013)

³ “military and humanitarian agencies around the world envision cities as the primary site of warfare in the 21st century and are adjusting their strategies and tactics accordingly. [Cities] represent the new frontier of warfare.” Muggah, R. (2013). *Fragile Cities Rising*. Global Observatory, International Peace Institute.

The regime reproduces itself through the constant incorporation of lessons learned, expert knowledge, policy innovation and a wide network of initiatives dedicated to consensus building among key actors. In this sense, as we have seen, the shift towards an analysis based on fragility, resilience, vulnerability and risk represents an important effort to reformulate humanitarian practices.

The shift to urban settings is a conceptual development based on the new practices articulated under the normative imperative of resilience. To be sure, cities have been at the forefront of many of the most significant humanitarian crisis and peacekeeping operations since the end of the Cold War. Mogadishu, Sarajevo, Freetown, Port-au-Prince, to mention just a few, became showcases of state failure. In the context of the first waves of humanitarianism however, the extreme violence and anomie witnessed in those cities were the result of the collapse (or weakness) of central state authority and institutions. In the recent perspectives, on the other hand, it is the presence of these “wild zones” and the dynamics of mass scale urban violence that determines (or defines) the fragility of society and state. In fact, as already mentioned, it is the relations within society and between society and the state that are object of new policies to address fragility. The reconstruction of nationwide state structures gradually moves to the background, as a result of statebuilding fatigue. This shouldn’t be taken as a claim that the international community’s endeavors to reconstruct dysfunctional polities -- or in other words, that the global humanitarian regime -- have been compromised by successive setbacks. On the contrary, the regime reproduces itself through the constant incorporation of lessons learned, expert knowledge, policy innovation and a wide network of initiatives dedicated to consensus building among key actors. In this sense, as we have seen, the shift towards an analysis based on fragility, resilience, vulnerability and risk represents an important effort to reformulate humanitarian practices. In fact, what is argued here is that the definition of urban violence as a humanitarian problem is a key move in the conceptualization of a new approach that allows for a new cycle of expansion of the humanitarian space -- the city. This move wouldn’t have been possible, however, without the discursive and conceptual deployment of fragility as an analytical tool to explain why and how urban violence could be treated as a conflict comparable to those encompassed by the humanitarian regime. In the remaining of this section we will make a brief discussion of some representative contributions to the move towards the urban, stressing the articulation of a discourse that seeks to frame the city as an object of humanitarian practice. We conclude the section with considerations about the political and normative consequences of such a move.

Violence has reached “unprecedented levels” in urban areas in the last decades. The scope and pace of the diffusion of urban violence has amplified its impact so much that it is currently perceived as one of the most significant threats “to development on a local, national and international scale.” (Winton,2004) While cities have historically been sites of political violence and criminal activity in significant scales, they rarely became the object of much international concern, at least during the period that followed the consolidation of the nation-state, in the late 19th century. Moreover, while violent crime or civil unrest have been a common trait of large cities in developed as well as in less developed societies, the current focus lies in situations of “endemic fear

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and insecurity” in cities of the global South, being often associated to countries that have undergone political transitions (Ibid.).

In a frequently cited case, many observers argue that post-apartheid South Africa has seen the emergence of chronic violence as permanent trait of social life, resulting from the transformation of defensive community organizations into criminal gangs, and the consequent proliferation of vigilantism as a new form of legitimate crime-fighting violence. In the case of Brazil, despite the fact that its transition to democracy dates from the early 80's, social disparities, institutional weakness, police corruption are identified as some of the contributing factors to the extreme rise in violent crime in big cities where drug trafficking organizations controls the territory of 'favelas' or slums. In other words, the trajectory of development associated to incomplete or deficient political transitions in states of the global south produce the conditions for the proliferation of new forms of violence which acquire endemic traits and compromise the social and political fabric of society, turning them into 'societies of fear'. While the combination of democratization and development should, according to liberal conventional wisdom, reduce violence and social conflict, the opposite occurs in fragile states. A combination of factors contributes to this counterintuitive outcome, but most commentators have focused on rapid urbanization as a major vector of stress on cities in developing countries. To be sure, terrorism and 'new urban wars' are specific phenomena associated to this new wave of urbanization, itself the consequence of structural forces such as globalization and climate change. Contrary to previous historical processes that enhanced opportunities, welfare and security of the new city dwellers, current urbanization in developing countries expose the poor to a plethora of hazards, forcing them to live under permanent conditions of high risk and vulnerability: "Cities of the South are particularly vulnerable because poverty, urbanization and the rapid and unplanned expansion of cities exacerbate the impact of terrorism."(Beall 2007)

The unprecedented demographic forces at the origin of rapid urbanization impose unbearable pressure on inadequate structures and institutions, generating new types of hazards. More generally, rapid urbanization can be contextualized within the acceleration of flows (of people, capital, information, services, etc.) characteristic of the age of globalization. While these processes are at the heart of the expansion of the world economy in the last three decades, they have also produced exclusion and marginalization of great contingents of people in less developed countries unable to adapt to the volatility and complexity of this new cycle of accumulation. As we have argued in the previous sections, states are increasingly diagnosed as chronically vulnerable to flows they cannot control, in many cases causing conditions of fragility. In addition, different levels of social organization and institutions of governance seem ineffective in the face of chronic insecurity and ever present risk.

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The combination of risk factors of a more structural nature with potentially volatile conditions on the ground is bound to lead to explosions of urban violence. A comparative study of processes of urban violence in the cities of Nairobi, Kinshasa and Bogotá suggests that the combination of structural factors of weak governance, economic crisis and social inequality with specific contexts of demographic shifts associated to displaced populations produce an “alignment of processes” that leads to explosions of violence. (Agostini, Chianese et al. 2007) In other words, to understand the processes that result in violent outcomes in urban settings we have to analyze risk factors that typify fragile states (institutional weakness and so forth) and more specific processes that affect cities, such as migration and other kinds of population movements, the presence of gangs, etc. The framework proposed by the LSE report yields a complex mosaic of permissive conditions for the outbreak of chronic urban violence. For the purpose of the argument made here however, the interest lies in how the conceptual scaffolding of the discourse of state fragility is deployed to the level of cities. As a consequence, this move allows for the linkage of urban violence the broader processes of international conflicts of the “third kind” (Holsti 1996) (or “new wars”, to use Kaldor’s term), as well as the articulation of the city as a political and social space affected by the same ills that define fragility in states. In fact, the authors of the report argue that ‘cities can promote or prevent the unravelling of the state’ and they have become central in the changed landscape of contemporary warfare. They conclude: “as sites of high crime and insecurity, cities themselves have today become new theatres of war and are rapidly becoming associated with [...] twenty-first century urban warfare.” (Agostini, Chianese et al. 2007)(38)

The focus on cities brings the analysis closer to the populations directly affected by violence, an effort consistent with the human security approach that underlies much of the humanitarian practices today. Finally, the analysis of violence in urban spaces defined as fragile effectively moves the attention of observers to factors of vulnerability as a basis for the evaluation of risks affecting specific groups of city dwellers. Hence the discourses of fragility and vulnerability come together in their identification of risk factors in the areas of governance, poverty, inequality and demographic shifts and population movements.

This shift brings considerable potential contributions to the formulation of a discourse on ‘fragile cities’. The linkage to the literature on urban vulnerability operates a seemingly smooth analytical transition to a framework that places environmental, social and political ‘hazards’ as phenomena linked by shared risks. Environmentalists, for instance, can look at environmental risks influenced by political factors and introduce problems of governance in the debate about disaster preparedness, combining physical, social and political issues into an integrated approach focused on human vulnerability and resilience. As Pelling observes, “urban areas in so-called developing

The integration of the physical and the social allows for an analysis of fragility based on the vast and sophisticated analysis of disasters.

countries appear to be increasingly affected by environmental risk". (Pelling 2003) Similarly, the integration of the physical and the social allows for an analysis of fragility based on the vast and sophisticated analysis of disasters. Conceptually, to speak about humanitarian crisis in terms of risks, hazards and vulnerability has the advantage of classifying them as a certain kind of disaster, especially if disasters are more and more broadly defined as events that cause disruption in specific settings, such as urban systems. In Pelling's definition, a disaster is a 'state of disruption to systemic functions' that can affect different social levels, from individuals to 'urban infrastructure networks and the global political economy". (Ibid. 5) Clearly, the focus of such an approach falls on human vulnerability and resilience as the main variables requiring policy interventions to deal with the risks to the stability of social systems. Instead then on concentrating in the reconstruction of institutions and other systems of governance in post-conflict situations -- which configures the main effort of humanitarian action in statebuilding strategies -- the integrated approach will displace priorities to preparedness and mitigation which involve community organization and physical interventions in the environment. The most contentious problems of the politics of fragile states -- rule of law, legitimacy, effectiveness of government, etc. -- slide gently into the background by the logic of disaster preparedness--bringing to the fore the core variables of vulnerability and risk--, which can originate from natural or social events. Since the causes of disasters are often indeterminate or unpredictable, their examination become a secondary matter in the face of the challenge to acknowledge "the importance of physical systems in generating hazard that can trigger disaster" and prepare appropriately. (Pelling, 47)

The combination of factors that underlies the new approach poses new problems and possibilities for humanitarian action. Three points seem relevant as an illustration of the argument: first, time frames of action change if the goal is to address vulnerability and build resilience. Agents are faced with open ended and long term horizons that are not subject to the possible delimitation by definitions of emergencies and/ or manageable goals of statebuilding; secondly, as vulnerability brings together natural disasters social instabilities, humanitarian action is faced with normative and legitimation challenges once cities are considered humanitarian spaces. More specifically, it opens the debate on the application of International Humanitarian Law to non-war situations and urban zones.(Fuentes 2009; Duijsens 2010; Harrof-Tavel 2012; Herz 2013) The third interesting problem to present itself is how to deal with violence in settings not traditionally under the mandate of the humanitarian regime. Under the broader definition of human security, one which encompasses natural disasters and violence, different manifestations of violence (political, criminal, terrorist, ethnic, etc.) can be dealt with in integrated sets of policies, and fall under the general goal of resilience building as an encompassing remedy for underlying causes for violence.

The conditions for the emergence of the discursive practices of convergence of war fighting and crime fighting have been consistently discussed in the literature on the transformations in the security policies of western powers, particularly the United States.

The convergence of these challenges finds an eloquent illustration in the ICRC's Pilot Project in Rio de Janeiro, focusing in seven slums in the city where the population of approximately 600.000 is particularly vulnerable to violence related to drug trafficking. In this case, the organization is involved in a complex situation of chronic violence, where the criminal element is dominant and where the humanitarian mandate is questionable at best. The project, however, mobilized considerable resources by the organization and served as the basis for the promotion of policies of protection in fragile urban spaces that lack effective governance, infrastructure and services. According to the premises of the project, the vulnerability of the population is considered analogous to those in war zones in fragile states. Consequently, the ICRC justifies its "right of humanitarian initiative" arguing that "armed violence in urban settings at times reaches a degree similar to armed conflict", especially in less developed countries in regions such as Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. (Harrof-Tavel 2012) The goal of this new experimental project, in line with what was discussed previously, is to reduce the vulnerability by building capacities leading to more resilient populations. The new strategy is, thus, to focus on urban violence as one of the most important challenges to humanitarian action today, having the model of complex peacekeeping operations as a framework and adapting its practices to the urban setting and articulating a new, people-centered language to define new goals, objectives and benchmarks of effective humanitarian action.

In fact, the conditions for the emergence of the discursive practices of convergence of war fighting and crime fighting have been consistently discussed in the literature on the transformations in the security policies of western powers, particularly the United States. In the past decade law enforcement concerns have increasingly populated security discourses, leading to material (technological) and functional changes in military organization, reflecting an overlap of policing at home and abroad, in what was categorized as "Military Operations other Than War" (MOOTW), which include peacemaking, disaster assistance, humanitarian operations, fighting terrorism, etc. (Andreas and Price 2001) We can see then, how the analytical and conceptual overlap of public and private forms of violence (warfare and crimefare) in the new security discourse would accommodate the articulation of military and humanitarian objectives and practices in 'situations other than war'. Illustrative of this new perspective is how Elena Lucchi, an operational advisor for Doctors Without Borders (MSF), argues for the enforcement of International Humanitarian Law (more specifically the additional protocol of the Geneva Convention) in cities of Latin America such as Rio de Janeiro, where some gangs "could be considered as armed groups in the definition of IHL". (Lucchi 2010) At the basis of her argument is, indeed, the assumption that "violence is violence", no matter its agent. Once this distinction is blurred the operational and political challenges to action in cities can be met: the city is construed as a humanitarian

The city is construed as a humanitarian space, humanitarian agencies become specialized to deal with new urban conflicts, and engage in the reinterpretation of legal and conceptual hurdles to act in non-war situations.

space, humanitarian agencies become specialized to deal with new urban conflicts, and engage in the reinterpretation of legal and conceptual hurdles to act in non-war situations. Examples of the practices unfolding from this logic are the operations of the MSF in favelas of Rio de Janeiro in the past 5 years and the current ICRC project mentioned above, both of them deployed in the context of a militarized security policy with strong humanitarian overtones. (Lucchi 2010; Moulin and Ribeiro 2013)

As vulnerable areas, cities become integrated in the more complex networks of infrastructures facing endemic risks inherent in the interconnectivity of global governance. In complex contexts of fragility and conflict, humanitarian action assumes the contours of risk management and crisis response and the dominant strategy becomes building multileveled resilience. (Pelling 2003; OECD 2012) In the words of two analysts at the forefront of this debate:

“humanitarian agencies emphasize interventions that promote risk reduction and urban resilience in fragile environments [...] premised on “resilience models” that incorporate urban violence as a central factor. Urban violence can be conceived as a ‘hazard’ in its own right and as a determinant of vulnerability”. (Savage and Muggah 2012)

The shift from states to people living in them and the focus on the dense urbanized areas of once ‘fragile states’ as a main source of vulnerability is, then, crucial to define cities as a prime target of humanitarianism today and the poor as the expression of the condition of stasis in which they are immersed and ultimate source of risk.

Conclusion: the new “ungoverned” spaces

The production of humanitarian spaces has been a central strategy in the consolidation of the regime, perceived as one of the pillars in the construction of a new international order.

The humanitarian regime of the post-Cold War era operates through rules and practices that empower international agents to intervene, design and conduct policies in areas affected by crises. To be sure, such crises vary in nature, scope and intensity, as do the quality of the responses to the problems they give rise to. This paper argues that the production of humanitarian spaces has been a central strategy in the consolidation of the regime, perceived as one of the pillars in the construction of a new international order. Normative and practical innovations flourished in the situations where states were either incapable to address crises or presented themselves as the sources of grave crimes against humanity. In this sense, humanitarian practices articulate solutions for the problem of ungoverned spaces and, as such, are indispensable in the constitution of the rules and practices of global governance as a functional necessity of the shortcomings sovereign states face when dealing with the complexities of contemporary world politics. One of the main aspects of the analysis developed here looks at the constant shifts in the representations and practices mobilized in the production of humanitarian spaces. More specifically, we tried to trace the move from a framework based on statebuilding as a process aimed at restoring authority over territories that had escaped from control of governments of ‘weak states’ to a new generation of operations emphasizing the need to address a multiplicity of factors of ‘fragility’ that cut across state-society complexes. This ‘third’ generation of humanitarian practices emerges from the exhaustion of the statebuilding paradigm, both as an effect of accumulating empirical evidence offered by its successive failures, as well as an expression of the intrinsic contradiction of an endeavor premised on the restitution of sovereignty to entities that are deemed fundamentally incapable of exercising it effectively. The important normative innovations associated to statebuilding however, particularly the notion of responsibility to protect, paradoxically represented the culmination of a conceptual and political framework that confirmed states (failed or fragile) as the principal authors of their own statehood. Moreover, it also reaffirmed that states- failed or not- are always a product of international rules and practices that confer their privileged status and agency in world politics.

As discussed earlier, given that the problem of state sovereignty and its corollaries could not be set aside by displacing sources of legitimation to international agents (something states have been doing since the dawn of the system) or disciplined through functional hierarchies (rankings, classifications, etc., also an old international practice) a new set of discourses and concepts began to emerge, centered on the notions of fragility, vulnerability and resilience. The new discourse articulated humanitarian challenges in consonance with the notion of human security, which displaced the focus of protection from the state to individuals and social groups. Gradually, the problematization of vulnerability allowed for a decentering of the locus of fragility away from the large

In a world where cities are more and more nodes in different networks of global space, rapid urbanization in developing societies and its inevitable contradictions soon became the driving vector of vulnerability.

frame of territorial sovereign states to the local places where everyday vulnerabilities of different kinds placed certain populations in permanent risk. In a world where cities are more and more nodes in different networks of global space, rapid urbanization in developing societies and its inevitable contradictions soon became the driving vector of vulnerability. Fragile cities, not fragile states then were to be the object of new humanitarian practices.

According to the new approach, urban spaces can now be treated as a microcosm of the humanitarian regime, decoupled in zones of variable risk in cities polarized by social stratification and chronic violence. As such, the concept of fragile cities offers the possibility of defining new responses to instabilities in the developing world without having to necessarily engage with the conundrums of sovereignty, statehood and intervention. Sovereignty and legitimacy gaps can now be set aside because they do not present themselves as problems in the already normalized 'non-war' setting of urban life. Here, issues of violence and politics are resolved under the shadow of the law (and the lack thereof) and of the various agents (public and private) operating at the local level. The problem of state failure becomes marginal because the real challenge is to deal with vulnerable populations in cities. Fragile cities can exist in weak or strong states. They are the new frontier of 'ungoverned' spaces open to the imperative of humanitarian action.

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The Humanitarian Action in Situations other than War (HASOW) project is based at the International Relations Institute of the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (IRI-PUC) with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The aim of HASOW is to comprehensively assess the dynamics of urban violence and the changing face of humanitarian action. Administered between 2011 and 2013, HASOW focuses on the dynamics of organized violence in urban settings, including Rio de Janeiro, Ciudad Juarez, Medellin and Port-au-Prince.

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This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from:

