BRITISH COUNCIL

Peace and Beyond

Cities: the new frontier for peace mediation?

Professor Jo Beall

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Introduction

Building safe and inclusive cities that are resilient to social, physical and economic challenges involves the interaction of many city-based actors and institutions, which in turn are influenced by broader national interests and international agendas. In addition to being a social and political process, therefore, conflict management and peacebuilding in cities is also a spatial process, acted out in particular geographies and places, by a multiplicity of stakeholders within and acting upon the city. Just as cities assume specific importance during conflict, so too can they become an essential locus of activity and engagement after violent conflict ceases and during efforts at peacebuilding. Cities can be important sites for forging transitional processes of healing and reconstruction and, when well executed, urban contexts can lead to generative conflict [48] and a sustained peace.

48. Healthy conflict leading to iterative and/or transformative social change (Beall et al. 2013).
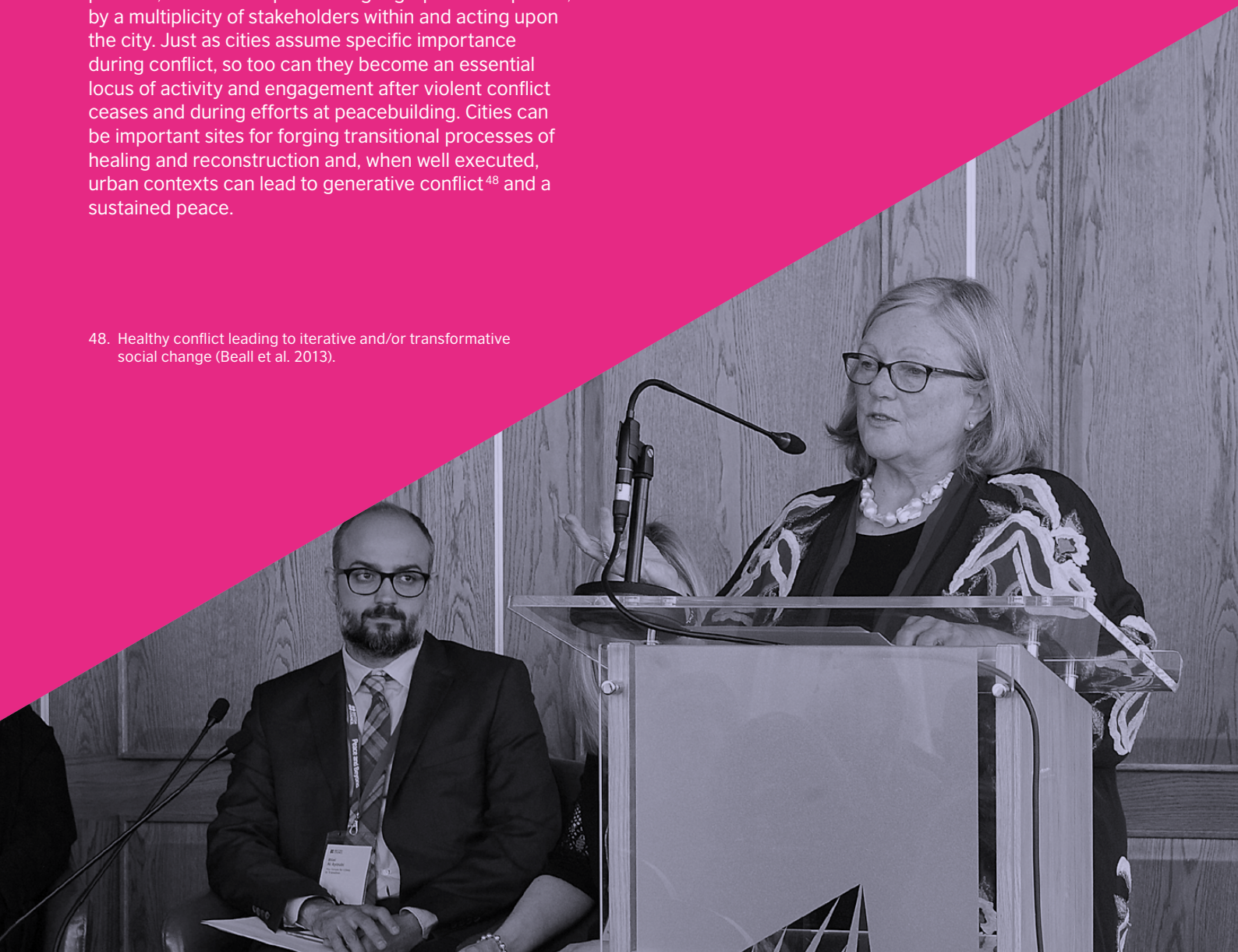
Cities and conflict

Whether conflicts are local, national, regional or global, urban centres have become increasingly embroiled, albeit in different ways. Cities can be targets of war, with Coventry and Dresden being quintessential Second World War examples. In the context of global terror, New York's Twin Towers were the symbolic targets of the 11 September 2001 attack. Cities can also be arenas for conflict: think Beirut over the years and Aleppo in the ongoing war in Syria. Equally, cities can be the eye of the storm – havens of relative calm during surrounding conflicts. Take the long-running civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the capital city, Kinshasa, to the west continues to function, while to the east, Goma has fiercely protected itself as a regional centre, a host to international humanitarian organisations and, most importantly, as an urban economic centre supporting cross-border trade. Cities are important spaces too in helping bring conflicts to a conclusion. For example, the capturing of capital cities often signals cessation of violence and capture becomes a symbolic gesture of victory (Beall et al., 2013).

What is clear is that cities are increasingly the centre of conventional and non-conventional warfare, with a new military urbanism focused on cities as conflict zones, counterinsurgency policy shifting from the mountains to the streets and ever more sophisticated technology, rendering cities more legible and accessible as new battlegrounds (Graham, 2010). Under such circumstances what is often observable is the translation of national political contests and goals into the urban landscape, resulting in what Arjun Appadurai once called 'the implosion of global and national politics into the urban world' (Appadurai, 1996: 152–153).

In similar ways, cities can become essential arenas of action in efforts at peacemaking. Peace negotiations reliant on and based in cities can face complex challenges and disruptions along the way. These can be due to issues at national or local level and their intersection with international agendas. Moreover, it would be wrong to assume that cities in transition are characterised by the absence of conflict. Cities are dynamic spaces in which people rub along, confer, disagree and engage in various forms of co-operation and contestation: between government and citizens, workers and employers, service providers and users, producers and consumers, known communities and distant strangers. There is a difference between the 'generative conflict' that is the lifeblood of healthy civic engagement and civil society, and the violence and fear that accompanies destructive conflict (Beall et al., 2013: 3076).

Cities and peacebuilding

Building safe and inclusive cities in conflict-affected situations or transitions to peace requires commitment from city governments and community leaders in promoting positive attitudes and values, building capacity, community planning and strengthening local economies and infrastructure. All are necessary to overcome social fragmentation and other vulnerabilities resulting from conflict so as to respond to the issues and challenges encountered by urban citizens in their everyday lives. National governments and national and international forces need to recognise the importance and value of city government and civil society actors and representatives of urban citizens, and ensure they are central to peacebuilding processes.

How are cities repaired and restored in the aftermath of protracted conflict? What do people need – emotionally, psychologically and physically – to recover from urban violence and to move away from individual and community fear? Why do nation states stumble towards peace and beyond while city governments and populations seem more agile and resilient? These are some of the questions that were explored at the panel on 'Cities in transition: leadership and resilience' at the Peace and Beyond conference in Belfast in April 2018. They were particularly pertinent for participants commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland, where Belfast experiences strong economic growth and degrees of governance consolidation, while efforts to restore government in Stormont falter. Yet these questions also resonated with the many participants from other countries with a history of war, conflict and the challenge of managing the transition to peace.

From the vantage point of cities, building safe and inclusive urban spaces requires social, cultural, economic and political investment. In this sense, engaging with the spatial fabric of cities is part of peacebuilding (Bollens, 2018). Investment in physical reconstruction can take many forms. Take Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina: a multicultural cosmopolitan city, in which for centuries Muslims, Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs lived together harmoniously. 17th century Turkish bridge that linked these communities was a symbol of this harmony. Surviving both the First and Second World Wars, its very symbolism led to this ancient bridge being blown up in 1993 during the bitter civil war that saw the end of the former Yugoslavia. For equally symbolic reasons, the bridge was reconstructed as a matter of priority when the war ended. In Johannesburg, the Nelson Mandela Bridge was deliberately designed and constructed as a symbolic gesture connecting a former white part of the city with an increasingly cosmopolitan downtown area, reinforced by the development of a vibrant cultural centre for the performing and visual arts. Nevertheless, the legacy of apartheid that saw vast highways and other infrastructure deliberately separating communities on the basis of race or ethnicity remains a concrete manifestation of segregationist policy and planning.

Resilient Belfast

During the protracted conflict known as 'the Troubles' (1969–98), it was hard to imagine Belfast as a city of peace. The alignment between religious identities and political and national loyalties led to the seeming intractability of the conflict. This was reinforced by the micro-territorial geographies, histories and loyalties of cities such as Belfast, which evolved through hundreds of years of political change and social identity formation in the city. Yet on the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, political violence has decreased significantly; the major paramilitaries have disarmed and paramilitary prisoners have been released.

This is not to suggest all is totally well. The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement fundamentally restructured government in Northern Ireland on a power-sharing model, but at the time of writing the national Assembly remains suspended. In Belfast there are intra-community conflicts among the loyalists, sectarianism continues to prevail and the 'peace walls' still stand, separating Protestant and Catholic communities. Indeed, in addition to remaining a physically segregated city, divisions are reinforced by psychic infrastructures.

That said, the city has shown astonishing resilience and stands at an important period in its history. Today, there is a generation of young people now reaching maturity who were not directly exposed to the intensity of the 30 years of political conflict that wracked Belfast. Belfast's Commissioner for Resilience, Grainia Long, pointed out during the Peace and Beyond panel on cities that from this cohort future city leaders will emerge, as will scientists, artists, industrialists and entrepreneurs: 'people who have the potential to make Belfast once again a city on the world stage'.

None of this happened automatically. It has been the result of strategic decisions and investments by a host of city actors, including the development of the city centre and renewal of urban infrastructure. Assisted by the fact that transition has occurred at a time when the city's economy is powering ahead, Belfast City Council and the Northern Ireland Assembly have worked hard to create a 'safe and secure' capital city in which businesses want to invest. As a result, Belfast has benefited from significant private and public sector investment for over a decade. The city has become a magnet for foreign investment in high-tech growth areas. Belfast offers a high quality of life, the pull of a vibrant urban centre and is well connected to a beautiful rural heartland. The yellow cranes that can be seen from Belfast's Titanic centre are a welcome signifier of the city's economic development and growing prosperity, and illustrate how attention to the urban landscape and investment in infrastructure can be an important part of transitioning to peace and beyond.

Belfast's success has to be viewed against the persistence of poverty and inequality. Deprivation was a significant contributor to the original period of violence, and it continues to be a stress factor and contributor to marginalisation and unrest. Living standards in Northern Ireland lag well behind the rest of the UK. Inequality is increasing and a quarter of the country's children now life in poverty, a figure that is expected to rise to 30 per cent by 2020. The Troubles had a particularly damaging impact on the health of Northern Ireland's citizens and a quarter of the population continues to struggle with mental illness. Due to perceptions about personal safety, people are often reluctant to access public services located outside their own areas. This has either created artificial barriers to social services and healthcare or the duplication of such services to serve the two majority communities at considerable cost. The estimated range of additional annual public service costs incurred in Northern Ireland due to division (such as health, policing, justice, education, housing and transport) is between £403 million and £833 million per annum (Economic Policy Centre, 2016). Another longer-term challenge is that during the 1970s tens of thousands of people left Northern Ireland and while there has been an upward trend in population, Belfast as a city remains under-populated, despite ongoing efforts towards attracting returnees and newcomers to the capital.

Returning to Belfast's success story, the growth of a vibrant and progressive civil society is part of it. It has grown up in the city both in spite of but also in response to the conflict. Hard-won expertise has been developed among the citizenry, with people using civic institutions and political engagement to establish more stable and inclusive communities. The city's civic record is a matter of global recognition and interest, in relation to peacebuilding but also beyond it. Yet challenges remain. The as-yet-unresolved legacy of conflict is a febrile common denominator that stands as a constant reminder that constructive effort could unravel.

More than half the population continues to live in religiously segregated communities with little day-to-day contact with each other. These divisions tend to be more extreme in deprived communities, which are often physically separated by barriers. Moreover, the location and function of other kinds of physical infrastructure can perpetuate division. Housing is designed and built to keep people safe by physically facing away for each other. While this may keep people safe, it does not promote mixing or enable sharing of communal public spaces.

Under such circumstances, can cities be agents of change? In her panel presentation, Grainia Long suggested that yes they can, if the leadership has the mindset, strategic intent and capacity to drive that change. In the context of Belfast, the legacy of the Troubles sapped much of the energy out of city leadership. Government structures are fragmented and designed to address individual problems rather than foster joined-up governance. However, Belfast recently joined the 100 Resilient Cities programme, established by the Rockefeller Foundation in 2013. This has helped encourage a strategic focus on urban resilience and has provided an opportunity to strengthen and reinvigorate the city's leadership at a good moment for driving a goal of inclusive growth and enhancing life chances for all.

Grainia Long believes that it is at the geographical level of the city that individual citizens can become most closely engaged with their government. In turn, cities have the potential to be more responsive to the needs of citizens than regional or national governments. As such a city like Belfast can lead on an agenda for resilience that can benefit not only the city itself but also impact across its hinterland and the entire country. As Belfast's first Commissioner for Resilience, she brings to the task long experience of working in the field of housing and place-making and believes that the best city leaders are those with a genuine interest in the lived experience of a city and an understanding of how the stories of people and their lived experiences matter to the whole city. Leading the city through change comes as much from its people as from its city council leaders.

Cities such as Belfast are complex systems made up of people, households, local businesses, voluntary and community organisations, small and large manufacturers, business operators and government agencies. People and institutions do not speak or listen to each other enough; they do not pool their collective capacity as much as they should; they fail to make the best of all their assets in the common good of the city. To reverse this is the founding principle of urban resilience work. Moreover, cities need to share with each other their trials and solutions. If it can do all this then Belfast has a unique opportunity, in the next few years, to bring partners together to think differently about the pernicious problems that face its citizens, and to innovate solutions that come from the city's own brand of creativity.

Belfast has a proud industrial heritage and was and will be again a global centre of production. The spirit of invention and endeavour may have been battered in recent decades, but it remains deeply embedded in the city's psyche. It needs to be rekindled by drawing on the opportunities presented by the young, skilled, energetic population, a committed city government and by Belfast's location as the Atlantic gateway between North America and Europe.

Transforming Derry/Londonderry

Down the road from Belfast, and on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, sits Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland's second city and 2013 UK City of Culture.

The Peace and Beyond cities panel was also joined by Noelle McAlinden, who has worked in the Education, Arts and Culture sector across Northern Ireland for over 30 years and, as former Creative Adviser to ILEX Urban Regeneration Company, was part of the original team that secured the bid and delivered the programme for Derry/Londonderry as the first UK City of Culture in 2013. She noted that the City of Culture Designation was indeed transformative.

'The legacy of being City of Culture 2013 is life and place changing for Derry/Londonderry, drawing us from a turbulent, disputed past to a shared respectful future as a child-friendly European City.' (UK City of Culture Bid, 2010)

She explained 2013 was more than a one-year intervention: it had a catalytic impact, evidenced through increased capital investment, physical and economic regeneration of the city and growth in tourism and the creative industries. There was an increased ambition to support and invest in communities of interest and communities of place. It was also firmly embedded in the strategic context of *'The One Plan for Derry/Londonderry'* that identified tourism, culture and the arts as a key driver for change in the city.

Noelle McAlinden explained how she witnessed first-hand how the 2013 programme used culture to support lasting social regeneration, through engagement, widening participation, and supporting cultural diversity and social cohesion.

The bid document set out a number of guiding principles designed to bring the opportunity for cultural engagement to every citizen, and promote and support that engagement at all levels in new, innovative and creative ways, so that no citizen would be left untouched by the programme on offer during 2013.

Youth were identified as a priority. The key themes of 'joyous celebrations' and 'purposeful inquiry' were highlighted. There was a drive to reconnect with the global Derry/Londonderry diaspora, using the enhanced connective technologies now available.

Noelle McAlinden noted that it is not only investment in physical and economic, or even social, infrastructure, but increased collaboration between all the key stakeholders, including the voluntary, community and statutory sectors, is deserving of attention in peacemaking. A high value should be placed upon partnership working, planned transformation and legacy. In building and sustaining transformation, both economic and social success for all citizens must be prioritised.

She also noted that an important part of the stakeholder engagement process was revisiting 'communities of interest' and 'communities of place', providing access to safe spaces and sanctuaries in which people could connect and engage in positive and practical ways. This led to outcomes such as increased and authentic understanding and communication, the growth of dignity and a sense of a city rising from the ashes: a city not just in transition but transforming; a recognition of and celebration of culture and identity and a sense of civic pride, not just within and across Northern Ireland, but something that translated into a growing confidence on the world stage.

This was particularly evident in the creation of the Peace Bridge that connected a city divided politically and physically; the cultural animation of Ebrington Square, a former military barracks that was reclaimed and became one of the most culturally iconic public spaces; and Krzysztof Wodiczko's public projection from an ambulance, with stories from people who lived through the Troubles, projected onto the Guildhall as part of Lumiere 2013. This was widely recognised as one of the most successful contributions of the year and enabling the city to excel in the lead-up to and during the Feis Ceoil festival of music in that year. The city has subsequently continued to demonstrate the appetite and hunger of a city repositioning itself as increasingly resilient and one that reflects the rebuilding of a better future for the city itself and for its citizens.

Tripoli's roadmap to reconciliation

Tripoli is Lebanon's second largest city (after Beirut) and the largest city of northern Lebanon. The region is one of the most impoverished and neglected, with many unemployed ripe for mobilisation when clashes erupt. An overwhelming number of Tripoli's 500,000 inhabitants are Sunni Muslims who, across the country as a whole, represent 27 per cent of the Lebanese population.

The Syrian Civil War and wider conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa region have reinvigorated flashpoints for inter-group conflict in Lebanon, as well as leading to an influx of 1.2 million Syrian refugees into the country. This has changed the social landscape, and placed high demand on local infrastructure, healthcare, education, housing and employment. The spillover into Tripoli of the Syrian Civil War has exacerbated the Bab al-Tabbaneh–Jabal Mohsen conflict, a recurring struggle between Sunni Muslim and Alawite Muslim residents of these two neighbourhoods. Bab al-Tabbaneh is a Sunni stronghold with close ties with Saudi Arabia, which supports them financially. Around 40–60,000 Alawites live in the Jabal Mohsen neighbourhood of Tripoli (out of a total Lebanese population of 120,000 Alawites) and they have close ties with Syrian Alawites, including the ruling Assad family. They have been rivals since the Lebanese Civil War, which raged between 1975 and 1990.

There was another major cycle of violence between 2008 and 2014. This is because the signing of the Document of National Accord, in Taif, Saudi Arabia on 22 October 1989, put an end to 15 years of civil war, but some aspects of that conflict continued in Tripoli long after the 'Taif Agreement' or Accord. It was not fully implemented, especially the commitment to withdrawing the Syrian Army from Lebanon. This took almost 15 years, which prevented the sectarian groups who participated in the war from taking seriously any reconciliation process.

As with Belfast, the city government in Tripoli was concerned with rehabilitating the physical environment and infrastructure, but unlike Belfast, it neglected the need to repair social relations. Hence, although the various militias were granted amnesty, no attention was paid to the emotional scars of individuals or the need for communal reconciliation, let alone on how to try and achieve it.

Bilal Al Ayoubi joined the panel to discuss the inclusive process of creating a communal reconciliation in Tripoli. With a deep experience of conflict management and peacebuilding in Lebanon, he currently works at the Institute of Strategic Dialogue in their Strong Cities Network programme. This supports community networks to prevent violent extremism and he shared with the conference his experience of developing a roadmap to reconciliation in Tripoli, which aims at creating an inclusive process of communal reconciliation. No roadmap existed and so a number of agencies in the city work to co-design and co-produce one to meet the unique needs of Tripoli.

Findings from the research that underpinned the development of this strategic roadmap, commissioned in April 2017, are sobering and point to two key issues that informed the policy response. First, in politicised and conflicted spaces such as these in Tripoli, there is often a complete absence of trust in politicians and political authorities. Civil society actors generally held the view that the authorities deliberately choose not to invest in rehabilitating and reconstructing such neighbourhoods on the assumption that there will be more violence and conflict to come. Second, a feature that fuels the divide between the Sunni Muslims and Alawite Muslims in Tripoli is the fact that both communities live in closed environments, so that their collective memories of war, whether real or not, become the glue informing their shared realities.

The response to this was to recommend an inclusive urban strategy to be co-ordinated in concert with the Municipality of Tripoli and the Al Fayhaa Union of Municipalities and the relevant ministries. The inclusive urban strategy works to involve people and organisations in the conflict zones in the overall development of the city. A transportation node, a medical hub, or even a waste management and recycling centre should be approached in ways that both provide jobs but also create greater linkages between the different parts of this divided city. The team implementing the roadmap understands that many of the recommendations are longer-term interventions that may be disrupted or otherwise affected by a myriad of variables and that these might operate at a local, national, regional or even an international scale. Nevertheless, the process is as important as the overall goal and may have surprising outcomes born of providing places and opportunities for people to come together safely and in trust.

Conclusions

In Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Iraq, the recent wars and their consequences have been largely urban, with 92 per cent of those killed and injured by explosive weapons being civilians living in populated areas. El Salvador provides another example, not uncommon elsewhere in Central America, where conflict, violence and insecurity are concentrated in cities. Here, local actors took the lead in resolving conflict, working at the community level to facilitate truces among youth gangs and providing training for members. The assumption was that if they had skills, employment and social recognition, they were more likely to turn their back on violence (Wennmann, 2018: 5).

However, local engagement is not always community-led. In a study of three Colombian cities during the civil war years, Gutierrez et al. (2013) look at how and why in the capital, Bogotá, and in Medellín, violence was brought down significantly, while in Cali this did not happen. They put these two 'metropolitan miracles' down to a political settlement between competing elites in each city that involved the local state in improved basic services, providing opportunities for young people and breaking down the spatial segregation of the cities through improved transport and other aspects of urban planning.

Cities are heralded as the new frontier for peace mediation (Wennmann, 2016). Yet documented experience of peacemaking in cities is relatively new, despite the fact that people have been doing it for centuries. Cities are a source of resistance and of human agency from which new beginnings can be forged (Muggah, 2014). Human agency can come from many directions: the grassroots, national governments, metropolitan and local governments, and even international organisations. The point is that they are concentrated in cities, which also hold within them the ingredients and potential for generative conflict and post-violence regeneration. There are real opportunities for the cross-fertilisation of practice between peace mediation and negotiation practice on the one hand and the extensive experience of participatory urban planning on the other. In the case of Belfast, we saw the importance of marrying an understanding of urban planning with social efforts to build resilience and sustain the peace. We saw in the case of Tripoli too that the roadmap to resilience was paved with similar socio-cultural intentions.

Recognising the significance of urban spaces and the spatial fabric of cities is a necessary but not a sufficient condition in city-led peacebuilding. Accompanying it needs to be an understanding of the inevitable social fallout of protracted conflict, and therefore the need to put in place mechanisms and processes that enable people to heal and rebuild trust. This involves rebuilding social and cultural infrastructures to complement and support physical reconstruction and economic renewal. Political will and accompanying resources on the part of local and national governments are critical but need to be exercised in the context of a distributed model of leadership. It matters less whether initiatives are led by the grassroots or are top-down. Indeed, it can be both simultaneously. Of greatest importance is that processes of genuine transition involve multiple actors and agents, including full and balanced involvement of what are often continued conflicting elements of civil society.

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'Cities can become essential arenas of action in efforts at peacemaking'

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