

Land tenure, conflict and violence in urban Mexico

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Introduction

More than 50 per cent of the global population now lives in urban areas, with the majority of urban growth occurring in cities of the global South. Urban informal settlements, which house up to 70 per cent of developing cities' inhabitants, are characterised by self-built housing, inadequate services and insecure tenure, due to their development through land invasion and illegal subdivision. Secure tenure is seen as critical for poverty alleviation, as it enables access to basic services and livelihood opportunities, stimulating settlement consolidation.



Self-built housing characterises many informal settlements

However, rising land values in many cities, compounded by urban growth, have resulted in a severe security of tenure crisis: more than a quarter of the world's urban population lives in conditions of tenure insecurity. UN-Habitat has identified insecurity of tenure as one of several increasingly serious threats to urban security and safety. Through the creation of conditions that lead to more destructive forms of political instability, the household and individual insecurity resulting from insecure tenure may be linked to wider questions of urban crime and violence.

Increasing levels of violence in cities continue to be a pressing development concern. Yet while gang- and drug-related violence receives considerable media coverage, in many poor urban communities it is everyday economic and social violence and conflict which dominates people's lives. In already marginalised areas, increasing scarcity of land and growing populations exert additional pressure on the urban environment, increasing the potential for conflict. Such conflict may have the potential to tip over into violence, and land (and land tenure) may be one such tipping point.



Land and land tenure are often associated with conflict in informal settlements

Land tenure regularisation

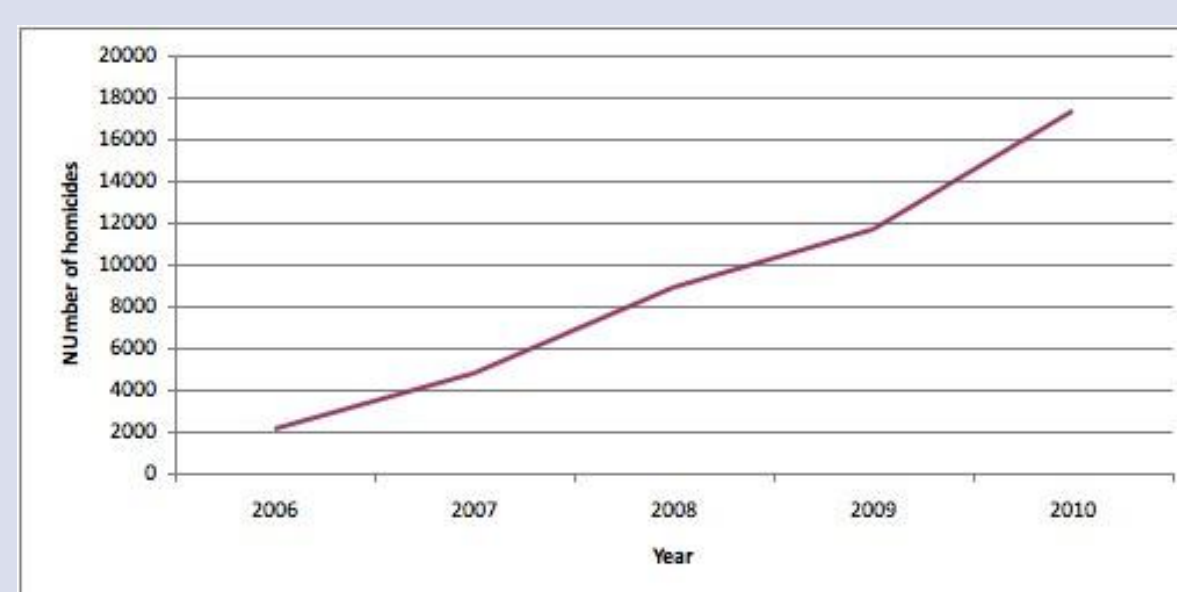
Tenure regularisation policy offers an analytical lens through which to understand land tenure issues. Following De Soto's advocacy of formalised property titles as the solution to poverty, tenure regularisation programmes have become increasingly widespread, affecting millions of urban dwellers. However, De Soto's 'solution' has been criticised for simplifying the spectrum of legality and for overlooking the importance of property rights *per se*. Moreover, land tenure itself may be a focus for conflict: alongside tenure's (often uneven) benefits, it may be associated with small-scale, localised conflict, linked for example to state-sanctioned fraudulent land sales and criminalisation of key actors.

Research questions

- 1) How is land tenure related to localised conflict, at the individual, household and neighbourhood scale?
- 2) What implications does regularisation policy have for this relationship?
- 3) How does localised conflict around land relate to (perceptions of) urban violence at the city level?

Research setting: Mexico

Mexico presents a particularly acute example of urban insecurity. Following President Calderon's attempts to crack down on the drugs trade, at least 35,000 people have died in the surge in violence since the end of 2006. The rise in violent crime and drug-related violence in Mexico has led to increased perceptions of lawlessness, with official responses directly affecting the urban environment, such as the expropriation and demolition of *barrios bravos* in Mexico City. In this context, Mexico's long-running land tenure regularisation programme offers a unique 'testing ground' for exploring the relationship between land tenure, conflict and violence in the urban setting.



Drug-related killings from 2006 to 2010 in Mexico (source: Government of Mexico)

Proposed data collection

Mixed quantitative and qualitative methods will be used in several stages in case study cities:

- 1) Secondary data on titling, from Mexico's Commission for the Regularisation of Land Tenure, offer an official account of tenure levels, to be mapped against instances of localised conflict based on crime statistics.
- 2) Surveys and interviews will gather resident perceptions of tenure, urban conflict and violence, to compare with official accounts.
- 3) More in-depth exploration of residents' everyday experiences and perceptions of urban conflict and violence will be gathered through participatory urban appraisal.



Secure land tenure is seen as critical for settlement consolidation

Proposed case studies

Three medium-sized cities, representative of Mexico's patterns of rapid urban growth and high levels of inequality, have been selected:

- 1) Xalapa, Veracruz, where the decline of small-scale agriculture in the surrounding rural areas and the increase in agri-business has directly affected city growth.
- 2) Chetumal, Quintana Roo, the administrative capital for one of the most rapidly-developing tourist states in Mexico, and a border gateway with Belize.
- 3) Saltillo, Coahuila, where the car manufacturing industry has been associated with the city's rapid growth and subsequent informal urbanisation.

Key references

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- De Soto, H. (2000) *The Mystery of Capital: Why capitalism triumphs in the West and fails everywhere else*. New York: Basic Books.
- Durand-Lasserve, A. and L. Royston (2002) *Holding their Ground: Secure Land Tenure for the Urban Poor in Developing Countries*. London: Earthscan.
- Government of Mexico (2011) 'Database of homicides related to organised crime', www.presidencia.gob.mx.
- Moser, C. (2004) 'Urban Violence and Insecurity: An Introductory Roadmap', *Environment and Urbanization* 16(2): 3-16.
- Scott, J. C. (1998) *Seeing Like a State, How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. London: Yale University Press.
- UN-Habitat (2007) *Global Report on Human Settlements: Enhancing Urban Safety and Security*. London: United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

Key outputs

- 1) Presenting paper, 'Exploring the linkages between urban land tenure and conflict', at World Planning Schools Congress, Perth, Australia, July 2011.
- 2) Presenting paper on 'Seeing like a state: The spatial dimension of tenure formalisation', at Royal Geographical Society Annual Conference, London, August 2011.
- 3) Presenting paper on 'Understanding small-scale conflict in Mexico', at 'Understanding Violence in Latin America' workshop, University of Manchester, October 2011.