Urban Safety and Security

Security sector governance for inclusive, safe and resilient cities

About this series

The SSR Backgrounders provide concise introductions to topics in good security sector governance (SSG) and security sector reform (SSR). The series summarizes current debates, explains key terms and exposes central tensions based on a broad range of international experiences. The SSR Backgrounders do not promote specific models, policies or proposals for good governance or reform but do provide further resources that will allow readers to extend their knowledge on each topic. The SSR Backgrounders are a resource for security governance and reform stakeholders seeking to understand and to critically assess current approaches to good SSG and SSR.

About this SSR Backgrounder

This SSR Backgrounder explains the concepts of urban safety and security and describes the various safety and security challenges that urban SSG is confronted with, ranging from road safety and property crime to urban warfare and environmental disasters. It outlines the different roles of the security sector at local and national levels in provision, management and oversight of safety and security in cities. The SSR Backgrounder then links good SSG to urban development and specifically sheds light on the contribution of good SSG to gender equality and disaster management in cities.

This SSR Backgrounder answers the following questions:

DCAF
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Governance

What is urban safety and security?

The concept of safety commonly refers to the control of hazards that are typically not caused by deliberate human action, but are rather the result of the daily and unavoidable interplay between human and material / environmental factors (e.g. fires, plane crashes, road accidents or environmental disasters). While security measures often seek to entirely eliminate the risk from hazards, safety measures primarily aim to reduce the risk of the occurrence of hazards and of their consequences. Safety measures are concerned with strengthening the resilience of people's material environment and with developing human coping mechanisms for the management of hazards.

Due to its focus on people's immediate material environment, the concept "safety" has been mostly used by those parts of government managing how people interact with this environment on a daily basis: Local administrations and service providers, such as fire brigades, health services, building departments, courts and the police. However, the distinction between "security" and "safety" is mainly confined to Anglophone contexts.

To account for the diverse roles of the security sector in the urban realm it is useful to incorporate safety into the analysis of security sector governance (SSG). The term "urban safety and security" used in this SSR Backgrounder takes a holistic and people-centred perspective on the complex vulnerabilities of city populations. It refers not only to the prevention of crime and violence but also to the enhancement of individual rights, including people's physical, social and psychological integrity.

What are the challenges for urban safety and security?

The combination of diverse hazards that cities commonly face distinguishes them from rural settings and requires multisectoral responses and coordination among local, national and sometimes international actors. Typical challenges for urban safety and security include:

– **Property crime:** Many urban populations experience pickpocketing and armed robberies. The anonymity of crowded markets, streets and public transport, as well as large public gatherings, facilitates pickpockets' easy access to their targets. Banks and shops, which are commonly located in urban centres, are vulnerable to armed robberies.

– **Harassment and sexual and domestic violence:** Similar to rural areas, cities are places where various forms of harassment and sexual and domestic violence take place. Women and children in particular are often abused in their own homes, by family members. Due to cultural perceptions of masculinity, men and boys often refrain from reporting their own sexual abuse to relevant authorities.

– **Gang violence:** Gangs often control fragile urban areas, where they are dominant actors in informal governance, providing security and other services but also extorting money and harassing the population. In some regions, gangs engage in transnational drug and human trafficking networks that provide them with significant sources of income. Gangs often also benefit from more or less covert alliances with individuals in government and the police.

– **Homicide:** Homicide rates tend to be high in those urban areas where public security providers show a low presence. Homicide victims are predominantly young men.

– **Terrorism:** Cities are particularly vulnerable to terrorism because they are target rich and highly accessible. While terrorists usually engage in targeted attacks, such as raids or bombings, some groups manage to control large urban areas, where they dominate local government.

– **Warfare:** As a consequence of urban warfare, essential civilian infrastructure can be destroyed, people can have difficulty obtaining vital supplies, skilled personnel leave the conflict-affected areas and displaced populations flee to peaceful urban areas. Women and children disproportionally suffer from the lack of services and infrastructure in the context of urban warfare as they have special health-care and nutrition needs.

– **Unsafe mobility:** Urban road networks are typically dense, highly frequented with diverse means of transport and often undergo rapid changes. This makes it challenging for urban governments to provide safety for all traffic

participants. Most vulnerable to road accidents are pedestrians and cyclists, and in many cities it is difficult for elderly people and people with disabilities to safely cross the road. Moreover, roads and public transport often lack sufficient illumination, exposing women and children in particular to increased risk of becoming victims of violence, harassment and theft. Access to safe public transport in cities
is also often unequally distributed between high- and low-income communities.

– **Environmental and health disasters:** The impact of disaster tends to be particularly severe in urban settlements, due to their high population density, complex infrastructure and, often, location in coastal areas. Unregulated settlements are particularly vulnerable, as buildings and roads tend to be poorly constructed and safety regulations are often not implemented. At the same time, cities usually have more human and technological capacities than rural areas to cope with disasters.
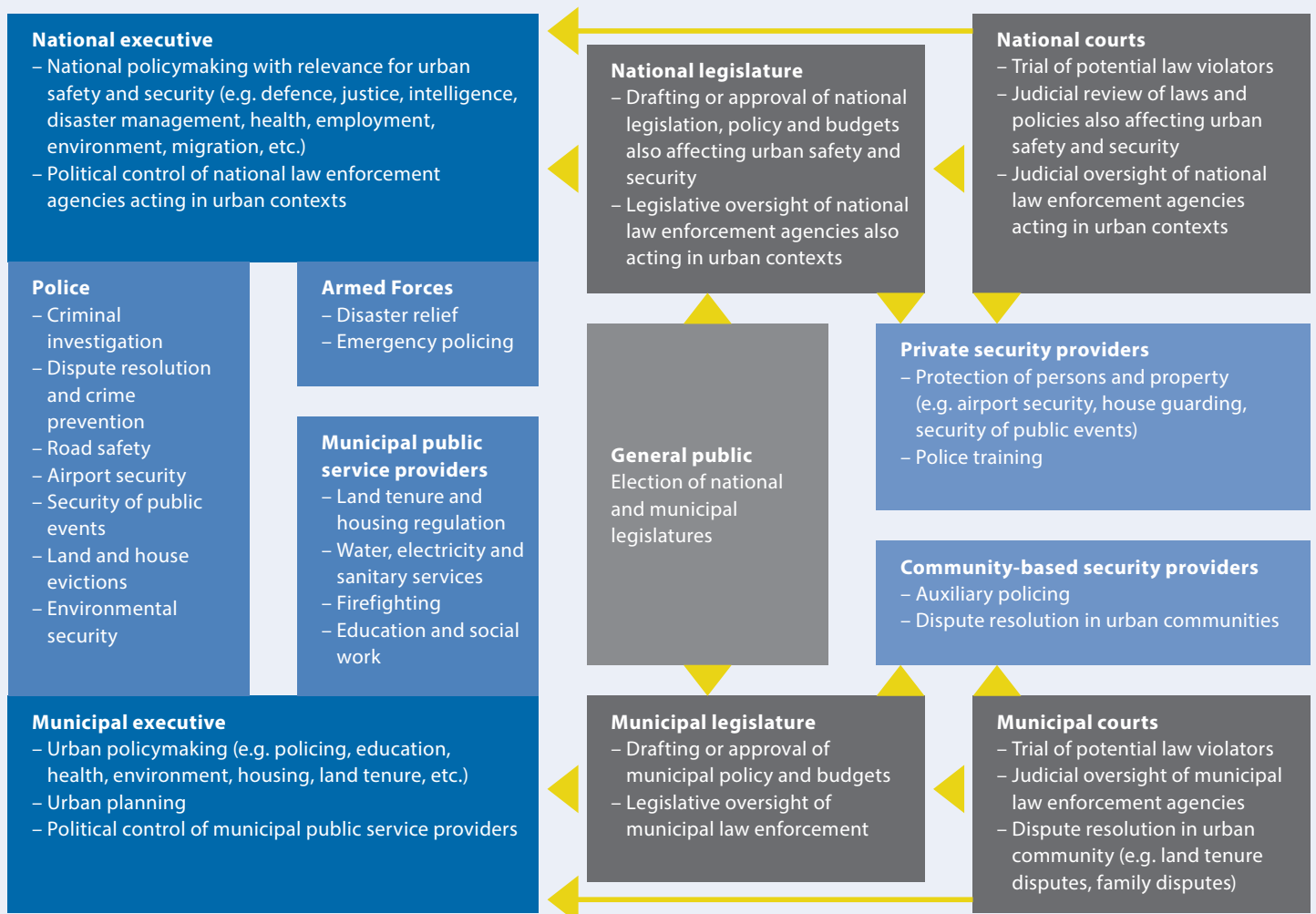
▶ Urbanization

More than half the world's population live in urban settlements. Many cities grow rapidly as people want to benefit from opportunities in education, employment, health treatment or social relations. Urbanization refers to the growing number of people who live in urban settlements. It is a phenomenon taking place primarily in cities of low- and middle-income countries. In these contexts, city governments are often not capable of establishing, or willing to establish, sufficient public service infrastructure in areas of rapid urban population growth. Such uncontrolled urbanization usually leads to "informal" urban settlements where the presence of public security and justice providers is low.

Who are the security and justice providers in cities?

Police exert a wide range of functions in cities, from combating crime to issuing motor vehicle licences and protecting airports, sports and cultural events. Municipalities have often significant control over urban policing, while, in other contexts, a single national force or regional forces are responsible for most policing activities. Sometimes, control over local units of the national police can also be assigned to municipalities. Also, the functional powers of police vary. Policing in rural areas might be separated from policing in cities and, in many countries, federal or national crimes are the responsibility of a national police force. "Local police" may also undertake a number of preventive and guard activities on behalf of municipal governments when the control of traditional policing activities is delegated to national or regional governments.

The armed forces can assist or substitute for municipal law enforcement agencies in performing non-traditional military tasks such as slum clearance or disaster management. For instance, the military may prevent looting in chaotic situations, provide health treatment, rebuild destroyed infrastructure and evacuate the

population in the event of natural disaster. In some cities, the armed forces are also regularly responsible for the protection of government buildings and other potential targets of attack.

Community-based security providers, such as neighbourhood watches, self-defence groups and police reserve corps, may collaborate with the police in providing local safety and security. Communities can thereby contribute to their own needs. Community-based security providers can also build trust and confidence between residents and the police. However, they also often lack control and oversight, in particular when they have links to alternative justice systems.

Municipal courts and **prosecutors** deal with a broad array of issues such as property disputes, theft, homicide, corruption, police abuse, sexual and domestic violence, and harassment. When they work efficiently and effectively, they perform an important conflict resolution function and contribute to violence prevention in cities. They also exercise oversight over the conduct of municipal government and hold security providers democratically accountable. Sometimes, special courts and investigators are responsible for dealing with gender-related crimes or the involvement of municipal administration in embezzlement, corruption and organized crime. This can increase the efficiency of trial proceedings and the number of convictions.

Figure 1   Roles in provision, management and oversight of urban safety and security

National executive
– National policymaking with relevance for urban safety and security (e.g. defence, justice, intelligence, disaster management, health, employment, environment, migration, etc.)
– Political control of national law enforcement agencies acting in urban contexts

Police
– Criminal investigation
– Dispute resolution and crime prevention
– Road safety
– Airport security
– Security of public events
– Land and house evictions
– Environmental security

Armed Forces
– Disaster relief
– Emergency policing

Municipal public service providers
– Land tenure and housing regulation
– Water, electricity and sanitary services
– Firefighting
– Education and social work

Municipal executive
– Urban policymaking (e.g. policing, education, health, environment, housing, land tenure, etc.)
– Urban planning
– Political control of municipal public service providers

National legislature
– Drafting or approval of national legislation, policy and budgets also affecting urban safety and security
– Legislative oversight of national law enforcement agencies also acting in urban contexts

General public
Election of national and municipal legislatures

Municipal legislature
– Drafting or approval of municipal policy and budgets
– Legislative oversight of municipal law enforcement

National courts
– Trial of potential law violators
– Judicial review of laws and policies also affecting urban safety and security
– Judicial oversight of national law enforcement agencies acting in urban contexts

Private security providers
– Protection of persons and property (e.g. airport security, house guarding, security of public events)
– Police training

Community-based security providers
– Auxiliary policing
– Dispute resolution in urban communities

Municipal courts
– Trial of potential law violators
– Judicial oversight of municipal law enforcement agencies
– Dispute resolution in urban community (e.g. land tenure disputes, family disputes)

Security functions traditionally provided by the State are increasingly undertaken by a range of private actors. **Private security companies** are hired not only by individuals and companies for their own protection and protection of their property, but also by public institutions and publicly-owned corporations for securing schools, hospitals, public transport, transportation terminals and utilities facilities. In these tasks, they often cooperate with local police forces. Police training may be outsourced to specialized private companies with the objective to reduce costs and improve efficiency. Regulation of private security companies is generally undertaken by institutions at national or federal level. Regulation and oversight of the private security sector, as well as procurement processes for private security services, are often insufficient.

Civil society and the media
– Informing the general public about urban security risks, policies and roles of security sector;
– Informing the government about public perception of urban safety and security
– Watchdogging of the conduct of the police, public administration and judiciary

How does good SSG contribute to more inclusive, safe and resilient cities?

Urban populations are often rapidly changing and are composed of diverse social groups that live closely together in densely populated areas. Security sector governance and reform (SSG/R) provides a useful framework for effectively governing these complex social relationships through people-centred approaches to urban safety and security.

– **Community consultation in local safety and security provision:** Heavy-handed, crime-centred policing has proven unsuccessful in increasing safety and security in cities. People-centred approaches such as democratic policing, which allow community members to be consulted or participate in security provision, can enable municipal governments to respond more effectively to human and state security needs (please refer to SSR Backgrounders on "The Police" and "Police Reform").

– **Broad and equal representation in the urban security sector:** SSG/R also focuses on broad representation of the urban population in all relevant municipal and national institutions responsible for managing urban safety and security, including police departments and defence and disaster management ministries. This entails equal participation of women, gender minorities and marginalized groups in the population.

– **Public accountability of the urban security sector:** Applying SSG/R to urban safety and security also entails increasing accountability of police and armed forces in cities. This can be achieved through internal oversight of police and military activities by other actors in the chain of command or by external oversight by elected officeholders, specific policing oversight bodies and other organizations and actors outside the chain of command. These can also include civil society groups and the media. Depending on the specific political-legal system of the country, municipal legislatures play various roles in the governance of the local security sector including, drafting regulatory framework (in addition to national laws), budget allocation and control, formulating local policies for urban safety,

inspection and control, and hearing/confirmation of senior police chiefs. In many countries, local external oversight bodies have the power to receive and investigate complaints related to the police.

– **Safety regulation in cities:** City governments are uniquely placed to respond to safety and security challenges in a tailored manner because they have comprehensive regulatory competencies that directly affect people's lives and can prevent crime. For instance, restricting alcohol consumption can reduce rates of

homicide and sexual and domestic violence. Furthermore, regulating the illumination of public transport and streets can make mobility safer, especially for women and children.

– **Equal access to basic services at the city level:** People with low income often suffer from poor public service provision in their neighbourhoods. They may live in unregulated housing, not have access to land tenure and safe public transport, use unlicensed vehicles and work outside the formal sector. Focus on effective and broad service provision in poorly governed urban

Figure 2   Urban safety and security outcomes achieved through good SSG
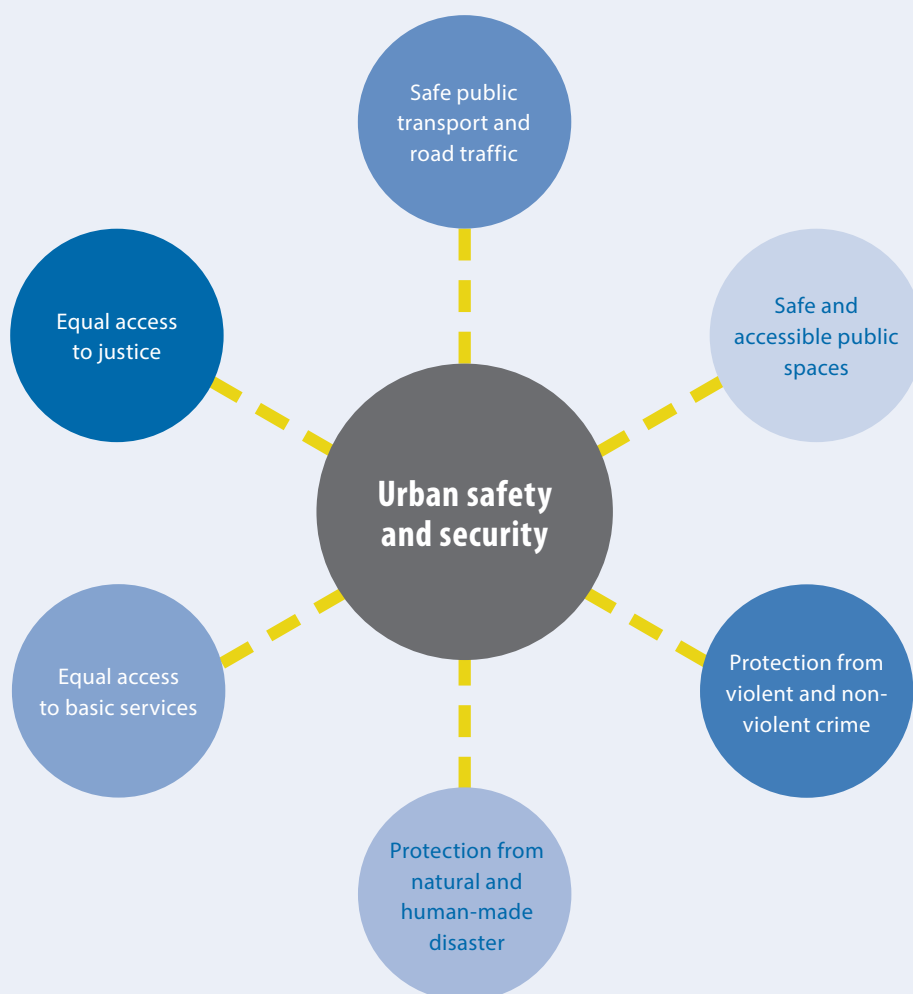
settlements, including education, employment, sanitation and transport, can restore state legitimacy in these areas and invest in crime prevention.

– **Vertical and horizontal integration of service provision in cities:** Close collaboration among all sectors of urban administration, such as fire, police, justice, sanitation, construction, health, environment, education and planning departments, is essential for addressing the diverse and strongly interconnected safety and security needs of urban populations. Furthermore, clearly defined roles and close collaboration among national, regional and urban security services help in better utilizing their complementary mandates, skills and equipment.

These actions aim to improve urban safety and security for everyone (figure 2).

How does good SSG improve gender equality in cities?

People with different gender identities often experience urban safety and insecurity differently. Preventive and multisectoral approaches can mitigate these gendered risks in cities, with a typical focus on:

– **Safety planning and design,** e.g. through police presence in public spaces, lighting, landscaping, urban furniture, sanitation facilities, potential hiding spots, signage, proximity to emergency services and access to public transportation;

– **Community prevention,** e.g. through public awareness campaigns on womens' and girls' safety, close collaboration with social workers, community watches and CSOs engaged in prevention of gender-based violence;

– **Monitoring and reporting of urban crime,** e.g. through gender-disaggregated data, indicators on domestic violence, sexual harassment and sex trafficking, and special phone hotlines for reporting domestic violence or police malpractice;

▶ **Good security sector governance (SSG) and security sector reform (SSR)** **Good SSG** describes how the principles of good governance apply to public security provision, management and oversight. The principles of good SSG are accountability, transparency, the rule of law, participation, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency.

The **security sector** is not just security providers: it includes all the institutions and personnel responsible for security management and oversight at both national and local levels.

Establishing good SSG is the goal of security sector reform. SSR is the political and technical process of improving state and human security by making security provision, management and oversight more effective and more accountable, within a framework of democratic civilian control, the rule of law and respect for human rights. SSR may focus on only one part of public security provision or the way the entire system functions, as long as the goal is always to improve both effectiveness and accountability.

For more information on these core definitions, please refer to the SSR Backgrounders on "Security Sector Governance", "Security Sector Reform" and "The Security Sector".

– **Formation of specialized police units and courts** to provide response and redress for gender-based crime, e.g. through special gender help desks within each police unit;

– **Improved gender equality within the organization** of municipal security and justice providers, e.g. through inclusive and equal recruitment and promotion, capacity-building and sanctioning of malpractice;

– **Legislation and regulations** ensuring access of women, girls and people with diverse gender identities to justice, e.g. with regard to land rights and domestic violence.

How does good SSG strengthen urban disaster management?

Urban administrations engage in disaster management to reduce or eliminate risk to people and property from all types of human-made and environmental disasters and their effects. In collaboration with regional and national governments, they develop strategies and capacities for the prevention of, preparedness for, response to and recovery from disaster.

Police typically contribute to urban disaster management through the enforcement of disaster preparedness regulations and the protection of people and property during and after the onset of disaster. Armed forces can provide specialized equipment and personnel for emergency communication, transport, supply, rescue or protection. The disaster management circle also involves a range of other state, communal and private actors, such as planning and building inspection departments, firefighting forces, health services, schools, civil society and the media.

Through its focus on democratic control and oversight and the vertical and horizontal integration of disaster preparedness and response, good SSG makes urban disaster management more effective and accountable:

– **Promotion of integrity** in public services and enforcement of environmental, housing and infrastructure regulations helps ensure that disaster management plans are properly implemented;

– Strong **control and oversight** powers of city councils, the judiciary and parliament, as well as rights to information and open speech granted to civil society and the media, enable them to inform the public and hold security services accountable for their conduct in urban disaster management;

– **Collaboration among urban public services,** communities, civil society and the media in risk assessment, urban planning, community sensitization and emergency response makes disaster management relevant to the needs of all segments of urban society and increases their resilience;

– **Collaboration between public services from all relevant sectors and all levels of government** facilitates the design and the implementation of disaster management plans that address all potential types of hazards and utilize the comparative advantage of each actor.

– **Clear definition of the roles of national and local security providers** in managing different hazard scenarios help ensure that the armed forces only come into action on specific request of local authorities and alongside or in assistance of civilian services (e.g. police).

What to read next

For more information on urban policing:
–   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and United Nations Human Settlements Programme
    Introductory Handbook on Policing Urban Space
    Criminal Justice Handbook Series. New York: United Nations, 2011.

For more information on urban crime prevention:
–   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
    Governing Safer Cities: Strategies for a Globalised World: A Framework to Guide Urban Policy-Makers and Practitioners
    Vienna: UNODC, 2016.

–   Global Network on Safer Cities, International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, European Forum for Urban Security and United Nations Human Settlements Programme
    100 Promising Practices on Safer Cities: Collation of Urban Safety Practices
    2014.

For more information on safe urban mobility:
–   Tapani Mäkinen et al.
    Traffic Enforcement in Europe: Effects, Measures, Needs and Future: Final Report of the ESCAPE Consortium
    ESCAPE Consortium, 2003.

–   Julio D. Dávila (ed.)
    Urban Mobility and Poverty: Lessons from Medellín and Soacha, Colombia
    Medellín, Colombia: Development Planning Unit, UCL & Faculty of Architecture, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2013.

For more information on mitigation of urban security risks for women and girls:
–   UN Women Virtual Knowledge Centre to End Violence Against Women and Girls
    Safe Cities
    http://www.endvawnow.org/en/modules/view/12-safe-cities.html

–   UN Women
    Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces: Global Results Report
    New York: UN Women, 2017.

For more information on urban disaster management:
–   United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
    How to Make Cities More Resilient: A Handbook for Local Government Leaders: A Contribution to the Global Campaign 2010–2020 Making Cities Resilient: "My City is Getting Ready!"
    Geneva: United Nations, 2017.

–   Jonathan Sandy et al.
    The Security Sector's Role in Responding to Health Crises: Lessons from the 2014–2015 Ebola Epidemic and Recommendations for the Mano River Union and Its Member States
    Geneva: DCAF, 2017.

For more information on urban warfare and urban peacebuilding:
–   International Committee of the Red Cross and InterAction
    Outcome Report: When War Moves to Cities: Protection of Civilians in Urban Areas: An International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and InterAction Roundtable
    Geneva: ICRC and InterAction, May 2017.

–   Achim Wennmann and Oliver Jütersonke (eds.)
    Urban Safety and Peacebuilding: New Perspectives on Sustaining Peace in the City. Studies in Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding
    New York: Routledge, 2018.

More DCAF resources

–   DCAF publishes a wide variety of tools, handbooks and guidance on all aspects of SSR and good SSG, available free for download at **www.dcaf.ch** Many resources are also available in languages other than English.

–   The DCAF-ISSAT Community of Practice website makes available a range of online learning resources for SSR practitioners at **hppt://issat.dcaf.ch**

Notes

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