



Policy Brief

August 2010

## How Nonstate Actors Govern in Medellín, Columbia, 1984-2009: Legitimacy and Governance amid Complex Violence

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*This policy brief is drawn from the author's doctoral thesis, Microdynamics of Illegitimacy and Complex Urban Violence in Medellín, Colombia (University of Maryland, 2010), which was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Smith Richardson Foundation.*

### Summary

In the absence of state actors, a wide variety of armed nonstate actors have controlled most of Medellín's slums for at least 25 years. The most successful of these groups have turned significant territory within the city into their own "statelets" for years at a time. Those actors who were relatively resource-poor won and held those statelets by legitimizing their control internally: they provided public services (adjudication of disputes, public safety, jobs, etc.) and enforced local, traditional social values. Those who were relatively resource-rich maintained control by force, coercion, and barter, and by avoiding illegitimacy: they maintained a relatively predictable daily living environment for the community. Rich or poor, successful nonstate governors were effective at border control, external defense, and, often, diplomacy, although none created formal institutions, few were sensitive to human rights or humanitarian standards, and all eventually were defeated by rivals for territorial control or illegitimized themselves to local populations due to corruption or overreach.

### The policy problem

Efforts to achieve security and stability in violent environments—such as the tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the slums of major cities worldwide, the criminal insurgency in Mexico, and similar challenges in Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere—are increasingly complicated by two major factors. First is the growing complexity of the operating environment in such places, which tend to involve multiform armed actors, in networked relationships, with shifting loyalties, and with diverse or ambiguous motives. Second is the growing complexity of the policy-making environment worldwide, due to the diffusion of authority, identities, and loyalties away from states, toward other institutions and levels of governance, including armed nonstate actors operating at the subnational or transnational level. Few theoretical and policy constructs adequately account for the complexity of these challenges.

## **Background**

In many ways, Medellín, Colombia, embodies these kinds of challenges. For most of the past 25 years, that city's violence has involved not just drug cartels and state security forces, but also street gangs, urban guerrillas, community militias, paramilitaries, and other armed nonstate actors who have controlled and contested small territories within the city's densely populated slums in ever-shifting alliances. Before 2002, Medellín's homicide rate was among the highest in the world, but after the guerrillas and militias were defeated in 2003, a major paramilitary alliance disarmed and a period of peace known as the "Medellín Miracle" began. Policy makers facing complex violence elsewhere wanted to know how this had happened so quickly—and more recently, what led to its reversal.

## **Case selection**

The study of extreme cases can help to illuminate general principles about relationships among phenomena. Medellín was chosen for this study because of its potential to illuminate relationships among legitimacy, governance, violence, and stability. First, it is an extreme case of high violence, high not only in its level during certain periods, but also in its overall complexity in terms of actors, motivations, and alliances. Second, it is an extreme case of instrumental social relations: social capital and trust among strangers are extremely low, and the tendency for expediency or exploitation to achieve short-term advantages is extremely high. As a consequence, Medellín's patterns of violence and instability might be expected to have been influenced almost exclusively by calculations of interest rather than by legitimacy or the quality of governance. If, however, a substantial role for legitimacy and governance were to be found in an explanation for violence and stability in an extreme case such as Medellín, then these factors can be expected to play an important role in explaining micro-level dynamics of violence and stability more generally. Moreover, because Medellín's homicide rate and other forms of violence have fluctuated widely over time, both in the city as a whole and in individual neighborhoods, it is a nearly ideal case to study these phenomena over time and at multiple levels of analysis.

## **Research design**

The Medellín case was studied over five time periods from 1984 to 2009, each period corresponding to an overall rise or an overall decline in violence. An "embedded case" design was used to review evidence for the city as a whole and for a sector within the city called Caicedo La Sierra, where Medellín's final battle against insurgents took place. Three questions guided the study: What were the patterns of violence, what explained the patterns, and what role did legitimacy or illegitimacy play? To answer these questions, multilevel, multidimensional frameworks for violence and legitimacy were developed to organize data collection and analysis. Quantitative and qualitative data were drawn from published time series, published literature, and interviews with experts and local residents.

## **Findings**

- (1) Most decreases in violence at all levels of analysis were explained by increases in territorial control, mainly due to victory in battle.
- (2) Most increases in collective (organized) violence (e.g., war) resulted from a process of "illegitimation," in which an intolerably unpredictable living environment sparked

internal opposition to local rulers and raised the costs of territorial control, increasing the rulers' vulnerability to rivals. As this violence weakened social order and the rule of law, interpersonal-communal (unorganized) violence (i.e., common crime) increased, creating further instability.

- (3) Nonstate actors who had access to external resources (e.g., narcotraffickers and state-backed paramilitaries) did not need to legitimize their rule to maintain control over their territories as long as they avoided illegitimizing themselves locally. However, relatively resource-poor actors (e.g., community militias and “true-believer” insurgents, counterinsurgents, and moralist vigilantes) gained and maintained territorial control only through explicit strategies of legitimation, which mainly involved providing services, protecting and respecting local residents and their social values, and maintaining a predictable daily living environment.
- (4) Over time, the “true believers” became marginalized or corrupted, to the point where most organized violence in Medellín today is motivated by money rather than by any social or political program.
- (5) Most perpetrators of organized violence in the city today no longer aim to control territory for the purpose of establishing order themselves; instead, they act to prevent others (including the state) from establishing order at all, thereby maintaining a local environment in which they may undertake illicit activities unimpeded.

### **Implications**

- (1) Short-term stabilization requires illegitimacy-avoidance. For example, in the *shape-clear-hold-build-transfer* model of counterinsurgency, which informs operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, security forces who protect and respect local noncombatants during the *clear* phase will be less likely to trigger local opposition that would complicate the *hold* phase.
- (2) Nonstate actors are capable of governing statelets strongly or weakly, well or poorly, and legitimately or illegitimately—just like states. This suggests that, where statebuilding has failed or is proving counterproductive, alternative models of stabilization, reconstruction, counterinsurgency, and development can be imagined, perhaps building on stable statelets or locally legitimate nonstate actors, if any exist.
- (3) In Medellín, statebuilding is still possible, but only if state actors, facing resurgent violence, can avoid illegitimizing themselves in the slums they now tenuously control. Their priority, therefore, should be to protect and respect local residents and businesses, especially during operations against violent nonstate actors. If state security forces harm local noncombatants, fail to establish security, or allow violent nonstate actors to undermine the tenuous order that does exist, the city will lose the critical local support it needs to hold onto the slums.

### **About the author**

Robert D. Lamb is a senior fellow in the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), researching governance, transnational threats, and the intersections among conflict, crisis, and development. He is also a research scholar at the Center for

International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland (CISSM). His research focuses on subnational and nonstate governance, legitimacy, and alternative models to statebuilding. He joined CSIS as a visiting fellow in late 2009 after completing 10 months of field research on legitimacy and gang governance in Medellín, Colombia. In 2006 and 2007, he was a strategist in the Defense Department's Strategy and Policy Planning offices, where he advised defense policymakers on terrorist, criminal, and insurgent networks and comanaged an interagency study of "ungoverned" areas and illicit havens. He earned his Ph.D. in policy studies in early 2010 from the University of Maryland School of Public Policy, where he researched civil violence and cooperative security as a CISSM graduate fellow, and was elected president of the Policy Student Government Association. He received his B.A. in interdisciplinary studies from Gettysburg College in 1993, spent half a year in Nicaragua with a microdevelopment project, then worked for nine years as a journalist, winning a National Press Club award in 2001, before changing careers after 9/11.