Claiming the City
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Criminal bands and the future of urban Tanzania: How life has been redefined

Colman T Msoka

Life in urban Tanzania has changed profoundly in the last two decades, following growing activities of criminal bands which are common in some cities and rapidly emerging in the rest of Tanzania as well. Cities are not as safe as they used to be 40 years ago, and the situation is worrying for the future of urban Tanzania. During the 1970s and early 1980s, when Tanzania was under socialist regime (Ujamaa), communal ties were relatively strong. This could be seen in urban areas as well, where sociologists otherwise tell us that social ties are weak because of city anonymity. At the time, efforts were made to make sure that neighbours knew each other – and even monitored and reported unclear developments. There was a system with ten cell leaders to whom all new arrivals were required to report. This, unfortunately, has changed; currently very few people care to know their new neighbours. Following the switch of political orientation – from socialist to market regime – some of the old, good collective values were left behind. The social fabric in urban areas has eroded with the growth of individualism and private attitude. The situation was made worse with the abolition of the ten cell leadership system when multiparty politics were introduced in 1992. Residents now do not know each other; neither do they question new residents or strangers.

In the 1980s, serious criminal bands emerged, mainly in the cattle keeping zones of Tanzania. At that time, cattle rustling was a problem that affected not only the livelihoods but also the lives of people, and it was organised by criminal bands, some of whom were part of cross-border networks. Armed criminal bands raided villages at night and drove the cattle away. This situation pushed villagers, particularly in the Sukuma zone, to introduce traditional security guards – known as Wasalama or Sungusungu – who provided collective security in their villages (LHRC
Reviewing international experience and lessons from Kosovo (and ZLSC 2011; Hangaija 1989). These collective traditional security groups were initially considered social bandits, but later on the system was formalised by the state (Hangaija 1989). The approach proved to be strong and reduced crime substantially, and it was thought to be useful in controlling emerging crime patterns in different areas.

Following the success of Sungusungu and its spread in many rural areas, the model was replicated in urban areas in the early 1990s. Although the response was good and several police posts were established along the line, the model did not fit this context. Life in rural areas is very different from life in urban Tanzania. In rural areas families know each other, have lived close to each other for a long period, and thus their ties are very binding. Incidences of crime were able to bring families together to form their own ways of protecting their wealth, and their families. In urban areas, ties are very different, and people have different commitments. Individualism is rather high, which keeps people from volunteering to do the night patrols.

After the initial period of bliss in urban areas 1991-1992, when people joined the groups to safeguard their homes and properties, the Sungusungu movement in urban areas went down, paving the way for crime to resurface. Subsequent to the decline of the collective security, private security companies – at the time slowly developing in the country – gained rapid momentum. Today, private security companies are common in major urban areas in Tanzania, and it is no longer considered a luxury but an important aspect to most businesses and upper income households to employ them.

Although gun control regulations in the country are tight, in most of the violent incidences criminals conducted their illegitimate acts with modern sophisticated arms. This began to send signs of the trouble that was going to face the country in the near future.

**Criminal bands in urban Tanzania**

Beginning in the mid-1990s, criminal bands emerged in urban Tanzania, using names such as *Tukale wapi kumi ndani kumi nje; Mbwa Mwitu, Simba mkali, Ubaya ubaya* and *Toto Tundu*. Others are *Mbwa Kachoka* and *Komando Yoso* (LHRC and ZLSC 2011; Nsanzungwako 2014). The
groups operate in particular territories and are found in Dar es Salaam, Mtwara and Zanzibar, as well as in Arusha, Iringa, the Lake Zone and the western part of Tanzania. The emergence of these groups reflects a weakness of the state in providing security to its people. The Sungusungu security system did not emerge by design but by default, and the state accepted it when noting that it filled a gap (Hangaija 1989).

The reasons behind the growth of these groups are difficult to map, as several situations are likely to explain the pattern. The first one and one that easily comes by is unemployment, particularly among youth. Job creation in Tanzania is lagging far behind demand; thus, lots of youth are in need of not only food but also money to pay their bills. It is now common in Tanzania to see groups of youth sitting around all day. Some have given their groups foreign names, sometimes from globally troubled areas, such as Kosovo and Torabora. This is not a healthy sign; these groups are likely to engage in criminal work in the absence of clear sources of income.

Laxity of the people is another reason that we can point at. Emerging young criminals and their cells are part of the larger society. However, presently a new culture of uninvolved citizenship has developed in Tanzania, the consequence of which is that issues that should be reported to the police are not. Some people argue that reporting is a waste of time since the people committing the crimes would, no matter what, be released in the next day or two.

The use of drugs and the level of alcoholism in the country is a problem particularly in Dar es Salaam. Drug users cannot find meaningful jobs as they are not trusted in society. Youth who consume substances end up as criminals as a way of solving their cash problems. They are of course easily absorbed by these criminal groups and at times used by people with particular intentions.

The national police force complains of a shortage of police officers to provide adequate services in the country as one of the reasons for the growing levels of crime. The few police officers present lack adequate means to reach many areas for surveillance purposes or to respond to calls by ordinary citizens. As noted before, the presence of the bands is a reflection of a gap, and this is a risky terrain for the government to tread
in. The cost of redressing the situation in the future would be relatively
dear, and the damage done by then would be beyond reparable limits.

**Effects of criminal bands on the lives of the citizens and development**

Several effects of the growth of criminal crews are evident in urban Tan-
zania. Businesses, particularly the big ones, close early to avoid vandalism;
businesses that have to remain open at night have an armed guard all
the time; people hire rickshaws and motorbikes to transport themselves
even small distances; and people have learned to return home early to
avoid clashing with the bands. They leave home late in the morning to
avoid being robbed on their way to bus stops, a fact that eats into their
productive work time. In some neighbourhoods, residents avoid big
crowds in pubs and markets since these are risky areas. Some families
have opted for private security guards, currently a common business in
Dar es Salaam. Employing security companies naturally increases the cost
of living and doing business. A new concern is that some of the security
company employees collude with criminal bands and share information
on what is available for stealing. This has forced the national police to
consider tightening rules and regulations concerning people employed
as private security guards.

The police force has responded by creating a Rapid Response Unit
(RRU), with police officers who are deployed on motorbikes to respond
quickly to people’s calls. Motorbikes are not only cost effective and quick,
but they fit the condition of Dar es Salaam which is jammed with cars.
On top of having security guards, some residential areas have homes that
are fortified with tall walls and barbed wire electric fences. Doors and
windows are secured with grills and metal bars as a way to stop or rather
slow down crime. In some homes, the magnitude of fortification has gone
to the extent that it is difficult to rescue people in times of fire, one of the
chief complaints of the fire fighting brigade in the city of Dar es Salaam.

Criminal bands in towns, cities, or in a country even, are detrimental,
prohibiting people from enjoying life, accumulating properties, going to
their workplaces or homes, and from using certain public places. Individu-
als cannot concentrate on their work as long as they are not sure what
is happening to their families, property or how to get home. Similarly,
an unsafe city will not attract certain types of business. Looking at the situation holistically, crime repels multiple opportunities for business investments as well as other opportunities, such as hosting world games, major conventions, tourism and the hosting of company head offices. These are short-term effects, but in the long run, the country faces a substantial risk of a growing number of gangs.3

In the context of Tanzania, criminal bands are also operating in the border regions, and in some of these areas there are active rebel groups (Ministry of Public Safety and Security 2007). The presence of organised criminal groups can provide space for regional rebel groups or criminal bands as well as for terrorists to penetrate and operate in the country,4 which in turn makes it easy for the gangs to receive modern arms training, find strategic areas to invade, and learn how to terrorise the larger community to amass wealth.

The networks of criminal groups will over time mature, and wealth obtained through criminal practice may be invested into the economy as a way of cleaning dirty money (money laundering). It is also easy for mature regional networks to join global networks that are known to be powerful – networks that actually make up a threat to the judiciary, the executive and even the legislative systems. Powerful networks plant their own people or may bend rules and regulations due to their strategic positioning. I would therefore argue that the police force and the government as a whole need to take this issue very seriously and monitor the growth of criminal bands within an improved national intelligence system.

Criminal bands and the future of urban Tanzania

The future of urban Tanzania as it now stands calls for critical examination. The emergence of gangs suggest that there is need for a leadership that is sensitive to the different problems facing urban residents. Not only economic and social forces explain the emergence of criminal bands; there are spatial explanations as well. The spreading of the city, urban morphology, residential areas, recreational areas, provision of public services and security needs explain part of the problem. Local authorities must be able to look at the problems holistically and develop solutions with big pictures in order to bring on board different parts of the problems
and their respective explanations. Thus, all sectors in urban areas should be integrated in the solution of the emerging problem of criminal bands.

Good urban order is a very important aspect of dealing with crimes of all kinds. Local governments need to consider putting streets and neighbourhoods in order and avoid uncoordinated developments. It is difficult to enforce law, reach people and help them if there is no clear address – and in such situations, criminal bands can easily put a neighbourhood under siege, before the police can reach them. There is also a need to modernise the police force in Tanzania so as to catch up with the new developments in the criminal sector. Inefficiency here would prove expensive, as it will provide space for the gangs to root themselves in the country soil. Also, the inability of the police force to apprehend members of different criminal bands in the country sends a powerful message on the ability of the country to identify global bands – and their operations in the country – as investors or even criminals in the Tanzanian economy. As noted before, it is very easy for criminals from abroad to move in swiftly to Tanzania by joining existing bands. With some dirty money, their path becomes very smooth and clean.

The development of criminal bands is, as we have seen, explained by a number of factors, working independently and collectively. To prevent this type of crime, the country must thus look at the problem from a multi-perspective approach: the development of a national character and values, community ties, patriotism, policing and unemployment. Nor should the options of globalisation, and the spread of new norms and values that goes with globalisation, be left out. Perhaps a new kind of education is necessary, allowing youth to acquire the skills necessary to create jobs for themselves and others. Skills-based education could reduce unemployment, which is one fundamental reason for the appearance of these bands.

Border security must be improved to prohibit the spread of firearms from bordering states. In the recent past, a new kind of trade has also appeared, in which active bands of Tanzanians collaborate with counterparts in neighbouring countries to facilitate illegal transfer of immigrants to a third country. Some of these illegal immigrants on transit are caught deep in the country, alive or dead, confirming that borders are porous
and that there are bands involved in illegal trade in Tanzania, and – most importantly – that these have partners or belong to networks in a number of countries. These networks are worth worrying about.

Despite the sudden increase in the number of private security guards in the country, the responsibility of the national police remains unparalleled. It is the responsibility of government to provide security to its citizens. Private security companies have limitations in dealing with criminals. Along these lines, national intelligence must be improved, particularly to monitor drugs and firearms entering the country. The growing amount of drugs and number of illegal immigrants nabbed by the police suggest a well-functioning network of unknown bands operating in the country, posing a critical threat to the safety of the communities as well as to the nation-state as a whole. Corruption is another security problem in Tanzania, which left unchecked provides room for multiple problems to take root, such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, money laundering, spread of fire arms, counterfeit products and even unqualified experts.

Notes
1. I would like to acknowledge the financial support received from URBTAN project at the Institute of Development Studies University of Dar es Salaam sponsored by DANIDA.
2. LHRC and ZLSC notes that during the peak period of Sungusungu operation, the country experienced a drop in crime of about 60 percent.
3. Gangs are difficult to fight once they begin to germinate in a country. In some cities, police departments are preoccupied with gangs due to the nature of what they do and the way the network is sabotaging different segments of the population.
4. This is already a problem in Kenya; Al Shabaab cells are claimed to have penetrated into this country and they are a threat to national security.

References


**Author affiliation**

Institute of Development Studies, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania