

Closeness Versus Distance: Relational Aspects of Community Policing

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Community policing is increasingly used as a strategy for bringing the police and public closer together. However, both close and distanced police-public relationships have advantages and disadvantages. How close should the police and the public ideally be?

Based on interviews with community-based organizations, NGOs, community members and police officers in urban and rural parts of Kenya, this policy brief analyses community policing through a relational lens, identifying the pros and cons of closeness versus distance in police-public relations.

Policing is essentially about human relations. Most policework relies on some form of communication and interaction between police officers and the public. The ongoing police reform in Kenya has given top priority to improving police-public relations, as public confidence in the police is low. Two community policing (COP) models have been launched in that regard: the National Police Service's (NPS) 'Community Policing Structure', and the 'Nyumba Kumi' model of the President's Office. Although both initiatives look good on paper, implementation has proven difficult, and the aim of bringing the police and public closer together has not been achieved. There are various structural, political and economic reasons for this¹; here the relational aspects of community policing are emphasized by examining the advantages and disadvantages of close versus distanced police-public relations.

BALANCING CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE

According to the policies behind the two state-initiated COP models in Kenya, the overall goal is to bridge the gap between the police and the public by facilitating better communication, interaction, partnership and trust. Klaus Schilchte notes that achieving the right degree of closeness versus distance to a population is a balancing act for any police service. 'There are endless stories about the tension between this need for a close relationship to the social space which is the object of policing - and the need for distance that shall ensure 'discipline', the ultimate orientation of police work towards the supposed ends of the state.'²

In Kenya, maintaining a certain distance to the public has been a guiding principle for the police organization. The deployment system in use is a clear example. Kenyan police officers are deployed on a rotation system, changing duty station at intervals. One officer explained, 'This is to avoid familiarities and not work in the area you grew up'. The idea is that police officers who are 'outsiders' are less likely to have a stake in local disputes and conflicts. This system can also enable unbiased, fresh perspectives and solutions to issues facing local communities. The regular shift of duty stations is intended to prevent police officers from becoming too embedded in local communities. As one officer put it: 'After a while the community has gotten so used to you so you may fail to affect, as you become part of the local structures'. One possible consequence of police officers becoming too close to the communities they serve is that they may form stronger ties with certain segments or groups in the community. Further, the rotation system entails deployment of police officers from different tribes than the local population. Tribal affiliations are strong in Kenya and many people will want to have a police officer from their own tribe to handle their case. The police officers themselves may feel obliged to be loyal to their tribe, or may reap certain benefits from it. Hence, maintaining a certain distance to local communities and populations may help to ensure police impartiality and neutrality.

However, bringing in outsiders to enforce the rule of law in a community also poses challenges. Not all police officers see the point in getting to know a new area where they will only spend a few years. As one senior police officer in a rural village pointed out, it takes time to become familiar with and understand a new context. Another police officer highlighted that some community members take advantage of police officers not knowing their way around: 'Locals often give you false information. This could be in order to serve their own interest or they might want to lead the police into an ambush. Therefore, you need several sources in order to know if people are telling the truth. That is easier if you get to know your area and your community.'

A darker side of the principle of distance is that it can be used as a political strategy. Especially in rural areas, certain tribes dominate the demographic composition of the communities. When the majority of the local police are from a different tribe, this can be exploited to gain or maintain power. During the colonial period, the British strategically recruited members of communities less hostile to the regime into the police forces in Kenya, in order to protect colonial interests. Police officers were not allowed to serve in their home areas, and recruitment was highly ethnicized. This led to a public image of the police as an alien element.³ As politics and tribe are closely interconnected, the current deployment system still provides opportunities for leaders to govern and control areas of opposing tribes, political parties, views and alliances, and to steer elections.⁴ This creates even greater distance, increases conflicts and fuels hostility between communities and the local police.

BRIDGING THE DISTANCE: FINDING COMMON GROUND

A challenge in implementing the two COP structures in Kenya has been to anchor the models at the local level among communities and their police. Several organizations and community members saw the models as top-down approaches imposed on them by state actors whom they neither trust nor feel close to. In such circumstances, initiatives by local actors can provide increased agency and ownership as well as solutions tailored to the specific context.

The district of Eastleigh in Nairobi offered one example of a bottom-up approach. Hostilities and tensions ran high between local youth and police officers, and violent clashes between various groups of youth occurred regularly, often over territory.

The police were at a loss as to how to deal with this. A local health clinic saw the need for building closer relations between groups of youth, and between youth and the local police. By talking with some of the young people, the founders of the clinic realized that many were struggling with psychosocial issues: 'We discovered that the problem was lack of belonging, low self-esteem, and that many youths did not feel they had anything to be proud of'. The clinic therefore started up several youth programmes, including a youth-police project. The aim of the project was to bridge the distance between youth and police officers based on the philosophy 'if people know each other, there is no war - knowing each other is conflict prevention'. The project involved joint training in psychosocial support, peer counseling and dispute resolution - skills useful for both youth and police officers. One youth participant said that it was clear that the police participants were 'also in need of psychological training due to their working conditions and work-related risks'. From the start, the police were positive towards the project; local police officers were even encouraged from the highest level- the NPS Inspector General's Office - to participate. The young people, however, were sceptical to even being in the same room as the police. 'In the beginning [...] there was tension, but after some sessions, the police and the youth started to understand each other. [...] A key goal of the training was for the community to understand police work, and the police to understand community grievances', said one youth representative at the clinic.

The first phase of the project involved training the trainers, leading to the second phase where participants went out and trained new groups themselves. Their new skills were soon put into practice, as a conflict arose between two youth gangs in the area. The first trained cohort of youth and police decided to engage jointly in conflict mediation between the gangs. Their three mediation sessions with gang members proved successful, said a youth representative from the programme. Another positive effect, he continued, was that other youths in the area saw that youth and police could work together. He was also glad to observe that during the training the police realized they had been unaware of many of the problems facing the community, and came to see that local policing efforts had tended to target youth. The goal of the project was accomplished. Some of the relations built during the training continued after the project was terminated. 'Some youths would call the police if they got into trouble, and a police officer told me he got some information from one of the youths to solve a case', the founder stated.

Naturally, such initiatives may also involve complications and unintended effects. For example, it might be that local police officers formed closer bonds to certain youth and youth groups, but not others, affecting police neutrality. Nevertheless, this project does show how bridging the distance between the police and public by creating common ground and facilitating safe interaction can re-shape understandings and perceptions, offering local solutions to local problems.

RELATIONSHIP STATUS: IT'S COMPLICATED

Police-public relations involve a difficult balancing act for everyone involved. Central to policing are human interactions and relations, which are often complicated and depend on many factors. All the involved parties bring into the relationship different sets of aims, interests, and intentions. These may be contextual or based on individual circumstances - and not all are for the common good. As experiences from Kenya show, close as well as distanced police-public relations can be misused by civilians and state actors alike. However, as with the youth-police project in Eastleigh, bridging the gap between community members and the police can help in solving certain issues.

This grassroots initiative also shows how fostering closer relations may simply be a matter of creating a safe space and common ground for people to get to know each other, interact and learn from and about one another.

How close, then, should the police and community ideally be? This will differ from case to case and area to area. Before designing and implementing community policing policies it is therefore crucial to assess the following carefully:

- The possible intended and unintended, positive and negative effects of close police-public relations, bearing in mind the local context and structures
- The circumstances and conditions under which closer public-police relations are created
- The aims and intentions of the actors involved as regards fostering closer police-public relations
- Who might benefit from closer police-public relations, and who might be negatively affected
- Whether local COP initiatives are already in place, to learn from and perhaps build upon

Notes

1. For a more thorough analysis, see: Gjelsvik, I. M. (2020). Police Reform and Community Policing in Kenya: The Bumpy Road from Policy to Practice. *Journal of Human Security*, 16(2), 19-30.
2. Schilchte K. Policing in Africa. Structures and Pathways. In: Beek J, Göpfert M, Owen O, Steinberg J, eds, *Police in Africa: The Street Level View*. London: Hurst, 2017, at p.23.
3. Ruteere M, Pommerolle ME. Democratizing Security or Decentralizing Repression? The Ambiguities of Community Policing in Kenya. *African Affairs* 2003, 102(409):587-604.
4. Hassan M. The Strategic Shuffle: Ethnic Geography, the Internal Security Apparatus, and Elections in Kenya. *American Journal of Political Science*. 2017;61(2):382-395.

Author Bio

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The Project

The ICT4COP research project seeks to understand human security in post-conflict settings by researching community-based policing and post-conflict police reform.

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