

Defining Community-Oriented Policing

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Collecting water to bring home to your family without fear of being attacked; going to the toilet during the night without fear of being raped; being assured of a safe upbringing for your children — all these examples relate to how people experience peace and security on a day-to-day basis. In many communities around the world, however, people do not have the privilege of such peace of mind. Instead, they are trapped in circumstances characterised by the ever-present threat of violence, and where state police lack the reach or capability to provide any sense of security. Even where state police do have a presence, they may in fact pose just as much of a threat to local villagers as the criminals they are meant to be dealing with.

While national and international police reform processes have largely ignored local communities,¹ there do exist a plethora of places where some form of community-initiated security arrangement is in place.² Sometimes these local practices work well, offering a good alternative to state dysfunction; in other places this is not the case. Some of these arrangements seem always to have been there, having been passed down from one generation to the next; in other cases, though arrangements were initially imposed by outside interveners, they have been adjusted over time according to local circumstances.

Community-oriented policing (COP) is an ambiguous term that is understood and practiced differently between and within countries. Various stakeholders – including the police, government, donors, NGOs and communities – have conflicting ideas about what its goal should be. For most, the terms ‘community policing’, ‘community-based policing’ or ‘community-oriented policing’ refer to a method whereby the police and a community form a trust-based, cooperative relationship in order to make the community more secure. However, some regard the method as a surveillance mechanism, set up by the police to gather information about individuals and groups within a community.

In order to promote a more coherent approach to COP internationally, the UN has defined the term as:

A strategy for encouraging the public to act as partners with the police in preventing and managing crime as well as other aspects of security and order based on the needs of the community.^{3,4}

Furthermore, the UN has set out four cornerstones of COP: 1) consulting with communities; 2) responding to communities; 3) mobilising communities; and 4) solving recurring problems.

While relevant UN documents clearly state that trust and legitimacy are essential elements of policing – and that UN police therefore should act on the basis of the COP philosophy when supporting host-state police and other law enforcement³ – the UN definition itself is one directional, encouraging the public to ‘act as partners with the police’ rather than the other way around. Our research shows that lack of cooperation on the part of the police often constitutes a large part of the problem. It is on this basis we suggest the UN definition is revised as follows:

COP is a strategy to enhance human security by encouraging the police and the public to act as partners in preventing and managing crime based on the needs of the community. In order for this strategy to work, trust between the police and community is essential.

COP holds the promise of greater community involvement. Our research in post-conflict environments globally has demonstrated that the majority of serious crimes are not deterred by a conventional, centralised police response – in reality, the opposite is often true. While the UN’s effort to standardise the concept of COP and the methods involved is a step in the right direction, it should not be regarded as a strict blueprint – local adaptations and nuances are essential.

Our definition tries to capture what we have identified as the three most critical elements of promising COP practices.⁵ First, the COP mandate should adopt a human security perspective, thereby broadening it beyond merely physical security and allowing a multitude of relevant insecurities to be addressed. Second, COP should be based on the needs of the local context. This implies an inclusive process incorporating representatives of all affected groups, as well as an understanding of how past state formation and conflicts – including historical grievances and visible and invisible power relationships – have shaped current state/police–citizen relationships.

Third, and building on the previous point, COP initiatives must encourage different actors – including police, local community representatives and non-state security providers – to work together in a reciprocal partnership. This relationship should be based on mutual trust, and have legitimacy and accountability embedded within it.

Our research indicates that where communities play a key role in defining, implementing and monitoring their own security and safety needs, community safety and security improves considerably. Of course, local initiatives should not be romanticised. However, for those individuals who cannot go to the toilet during the night without fear of being raped; who risk assault every time they collect water; who strive daily to ensure a safe environment for their children; the opportunity to engage in safety and security planning within their communities offers a means of making a tangible difference to their everyday lives.

Notes

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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.

The Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) is the project coordinator.

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