Trust in Community-Oriented Policing: Reflections on the Results of Research in Central America

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In this policy brief, we highlight the comparative policy implications of our research on Community-Oriented Policing (COP) in Central America. The policy brief emphasizes the enduring problem of trust in the context of region and the threat a current political return to authoritarianism represents to historic gains with COP and human security. Drawing on this context, the brief furthermore stresses the wider implications of a failure to take trust building seriously for wider policing practice.

ICT4COP

Our in-depth and qualitative research was conducted in three country cases (Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua). Our discussion of the experience of COP in these contexts is based on substantial research carried out for the European Union Horizon 2020 financed project "Community Based Policing and Post-conflict Police Reform" (ICT4COP). In connection to this project a series of researchers, local and international research institutions have collaborated to carry out qualitative field research over a five-year period in different locations within each country. This research has involved the application of a series of methodologies including semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, and participant-observation. Seeking to apply the best practices of research ethics, care was taken in each context to ensure formal research permissions, secure data storage, prior consent from all interview subjects and informants, and to form co-productive relations with both community and police institutions.

COP IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Efforts to reform the police forces in Latin America and to introduce models for COP multiplied throughout the region in the 1990s. This was in large degree encouraged by the return to democratic rule of law and a desire to reset relations between states and populations across the region in the same period. The wave of reform matched the trend for the introduction of COP programs in other post-conflict contexts elsewhere in the world . The signing of the peace accords between the governments and armed opposition groups in El Salvador in 1992 and Guatemala in 1996 was particularly significant to police reform in the region. In both cases, the peace accords stipulated the creation of new civilian police forces to replace the former police bodies that had operated under the auspices of the military. In the years that followed, initiatives of police reform extended throughout the rest of the region. These processes had been strongly influenced by wider trends in international policing.

From the perspective of governments in the region, COP united the goal of democratic legitimacy and crime control. Across the region, elected officials began to shift their public security paradigm from repression to prevention in the mid-1990s. Governments attempting to legitimize their approaches to public security in an era of democracy accompanied by ever-rising rates of crime and violence used COP as a methods to reform policing, but also as a way to sell policing to the public. The adoption of these experiences was also strongly supported by multilateral and bilateral institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank, GIZ, JICA, Norad and the European Union, who saw the change as an appropriate path towards a more democratic form of policing. Formally, COP aimed to deal with the causes of crime rather than simply respond to it- by empowering citizens, building police community partnerships, improving social services and generating better crime statistics. Street patrols, policy councils and youth services were also significant extensions to the programs adopted by Latin American COP models.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRUST IN POLICE

Legitimacy and trust are viewed in criminological research as inter-linked factors that can help to predict the behavior of individuals and collective actors in their adherence to a set of norms and in respect (obedience) to the law. Withholding trust from police will often be perfectly sensible and rational, especially where trustors' security needs and interests are better served by other arrangements. According to Tyler, trust in the police has two key characteristics. The first, institutional confidence, refers to the beliefs of the citizen with respect to the honesty and competence of the police in carrying out their mandated responsibilities. The second, based on motives, is based in the interpretation of the intentions and motivations of the police in their interactions with citizens. A perspective is formed here of trust that is formed on the basis of how the police carry out their work in daily contact with citizens.

Significant emphasis is also given in existing literature to the role of legitimacy as a vital dimension of trust. The legitimacy of the police has been understood here to mean the characteristics of the institution in terms of its perceived credibility and deference to the concerns of the public. Divided, developing, authoritarian and post-conflict societies have tended to lack, or have failed to establish a credible ideology of policing by consent. In societies in which police are deployed to bolster the political authority of the regime, police will often be used under the guise of the law against political opponents and ethnic minorities. In such countries, we see fear of police existing broadly within the community, as well as fear of crime, based upon actual experience or close contact with victims of police violence. In these contexts, interpersonal distrust will often be sensible at an individual level in terms of reducing risk from others or encouraged by the state through fostering extensive civilian spying networks. Ensuring police accountability as part of the process of building trust in these contexts must therefore contend with structural and historically defined disparities. Informal, communal modes of accountability are likely to be less promising in the short to medium term, suggesting the need for more explicit, contractual forms of accountability until broader bases for trust can be found.

Considering the manner in which trust and accountability are structurally and historically defined may help to push understanding in a more sociological/anthropological direction. The entrenched nature of antagonistic relationships with the police and certain groups of society are indicative the lack of a common or shared "habitus" - a set of historical relations deposited within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporal schemata of perception, appreciation and action. For subordinate groups, the perceived bases for distrust of the police will emerge from the particular habitus they possess, grounded in the personal experiences, shared narratives and interpretive frames located within these groups. As Broch-Due and Ystanes suggest "thinly conceived conceptualizations are ill suited to unpack the complex, manifold ways in which trust is conceptualized, formed and lived around the world". They suggest that we should dissolve the singularly conceived subject and focus our attention on trust not as a "thing" that can be easily defined and accounted for, but as a composite social phenomenon arising between bodies, minds and intersubjectivity. As they suggest, trusting subjects inhabit complex social landscapes and observe and engage with their surroundings from a variety of social positions.

THE LINGERING PROBLEM OF TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY

As our research demonstrates, trust and accountability persist as major challenges in the context of policing in Central America, and COP in particular. In such contexts- where economic divisions between rich and poor have grown, and government is riddled with corrupt and illegal actors, is perhaps not surprising that trust and legitimacy in the rule of law and the police have not taken root. Indeed, when promises of development and land redistribution have not been delivered and expanding extractive frontiers and mega-development and infrastructure projects have continued to displace indigenous and small-holder families from their lands, there have been significant reactions of protest and legal action in return. Local communities have disputed their loss of land and the damage done to soil, forest and rivers as a result of industrial agriculture, mining and oil extraction, energy and infrastructure development. Reflecting on the actors and communities involved in these protests, it is also evident that there are elements of built-up historical grievance dating from the civil wars and ontological differences (contrasting means of valuing the land and environment) that further fuel these current contestations. In all three of these countries large-scale protests have been held and militant and legal actions used to blockade the access of developers to concessions. In Guatemala, mining, oil drilling and hydro-electric projects have been the focus of these actions. In El Salvador protests and legal action against mining resulted in a decision of the National Legislative Assembly to ban all mining in the country in 2017.

In Nicaragua protests have focused on mining concessions on the Atlantic Coast as well as points along the proposed route of a projected bio-oceanic canal. This has generated the need for 'protection' for the investors. In the post-conflict contexts of Guatemala and El Salvador the combination of a vast number of unemployed but skilled security personnel outside the formal security institutions and large demand for protection by licit as well as illicit business which the public security sector has not been able to fill, has resulted in the rapid proliferation of private security companies with different links to the police and the military. As of 2012, there were around 300,000 private security guards in the Northern Triangle. In Guatemala they outnumber the police by a factor of one to four. Investigations and reports by human rights organizations such as Global Witness suggest that the rise in the murder of land and environmental activists in Guatemala and other countries can be directly connected to privately contracted security actors of this kind.

Other than these private actors, there was also an expectation by the private sector and government that the military and police also take a role in providing protections. In each of the three countries in focus here this demand for protection has fed into electoral and political platforms in the form of security reforms expressing a need for more forceful tactics to secure law and order. This led to renewed financing for mano dura (heavy hand) operations and police units that operated with more militarized tactics and equipment. Although it did not mean the end of adopted COP models, our research in parallel with others suggests they have been either side-lined or used as a means to further legitimize harsh policing tactics.

STRUGGLING COPS

As more authoritarian politics persists and is rejuvenated in the region efforts at progressive police reform including the further implementation of community-oriented policing are clearly stalling. Moves towards more militarized and aggressive policing strategies are formally explained by governments and police forces as necessary measures to combat the rising threat of gangs and organized crime. However, as we have revealed in this article these changes also reflect new expressions of political authoritarianism and a favoring of clientelist relationships between government and the private sector. In all three contexts we the changing political climate is reflected in increased levels of political unrest and in the increased incidence of police repression of open dissent. As a result of these persisting features a breakdown in state-community relations is occurring in all three countries- albeit with somewhat distinct features and gravity. A significant feature of this breakdown is not only new articulations of civil and political violence, but a major reversal of the human security- concerned not only with public order, but well-being- that had started to take root and with the establishment of community-oriented policing in the region.

REFERENCE
McNeish, J; Matute, A; Rojas, E; Frühling, H. (Forthcoming) 'Comparative Reflections on Community-Oriented Policing (COP) in Post-Conflict Central America'.

Author Bio
John-Andrew McNeish led ICT4COP's Work Package 9: Central America, carrying out field research in Nicaragua resulting in one published article. He also has contributed to Work Package 2: Comparative COP through writing a comparative article, and was a member of the project's steering committee.

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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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