

Possibilities of Advancing Police Reform in Guatemala Through COP

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Police reform has been sought in Latin America since authoritarian regimes declined in the late 20th century. In Guatemala, reform was launched in 1996 after a brutal civil war, with the creation of a National Civilian Police (PNC) designed to act in full respect of human rights. Regrettably, more than two decades later, the PNC with its own COP-like strategy, has struggled to develop into an effective security institution, due partially to inconsistent political support from national and institutional authorities. This policy brief uses research from two localities of Guatemala to argue that, in spite of difficulties, community-oriented policing (COP) strategies open opportunities to move police reform forward in the high-violence, low-trust, weak-institutions, post- conflict context of Guatemala.

INTRODUCTION

The post-conflict context of Guatemala is not ideal for the implementation of COP. The stakes are especially high in metropolitan areas where homicidal violence, extortion schemes and threats to physical integrity or life, mainly coming from street-gang members, are common. Moreover, there is an insufficient understanding from the population about the importance of furthering a human-security approach to provide individuals the protection they need, instead of the traditional understanding of security as a monopoly of those in power with the objective of protecting their interests.

Still, in 2014, Guatemala's National Civilian Police (PNC) launched its most serious effort to date to institutionalize a preventative approach to security by sanctioning the Integral Community Security Police Model (MOPSIC), which is described in its manual as 'a model inspired on the community policing philosophy and doctrine'. The MOPSIC, which was developed with the direct participation of the PNC, sets out the values, norms, and provides tools for police practice to serve societal needs, in a manner that is respectful of human rights. The MOPSIC manual also provides tools with which to study the situation of crime in assigned districts in order to formulate a diagnostic of the security situation, allowing for the planning of an appropriate police response. However, an evaluation of the initial implementation of MOPSIC found that only 25% of the Central District had

been trained in MOPSIC by 2017. Although the basis for a new understanding of policing in a democratic context is in place, patchy knowledge, high turnover and low trust encumber MOPSIC application.

TWO COP CASES IN GUATEMALA

Our research set out to identify the difficulties and the opportunities that exist to further the implementation of COP in specific territories. Qualitative sampling methods were used to identify Villa Canales and Totonicapán as the sites for field research; both localities had MOPSIC implemented but with very different attributes relating to violence levels and social organization.

Villa Canales

Villa Canales is a metropolitan municipality in the vicinity of Guatemala City, and is one of the most violent municipalities in the country with a homicide rate of 37 per 100,000 in 2019. Insecurity commonly comes in the form of street gangs, violent street robberies, local narcotics traffickers (although they also provide a form of protection to those that live nearby). Despite the concentration of human resources in the metropolitan region, personnel are still insufficient for patrols to cover permanently all of the territory; in hard-to-reach places, the PNC has established agreements with local authorities for them to carry out surveillance activities and inform the police if a problem arises.

The research found that in Villa Canales, despite inefficient communal organization and low interpersonal trust, COP strategies have been able to establish on-foot patrolling routes and compel police-people to carry out meetings with residents. The agents, though, were found to have neither the necessary capacities nor the methods and tools necessary to produce efficient plans and agreements for the co-production of local security. The amount of attention given to specific security problems suffered by the population was insufficient, and the monitoring capacities of the police were found to be negatively affected by the central police offices' data management, as they failed to provide useful feedback.

Totonicapán

Totonicapán is a municipality in the western highlands with low levels of criminal violence and strong indigenous communal organization. It is a relatively autonomous region where traditional forms of indigenous local governance prevail and is one of the most peaceful municipalities in the country with a homicide rate of 2.4 per 100,000 in 2019.

Totonicapán has proven extraordinarily capable of keeping away from the violent dynamics that have engulfed most of the country throughout its history, for which the strength of its traditional governance is credited. In Totonicapán the police, and all other national institutions, must coordinate their actions with the strong local governance structures that are the de facto administrators of the territory. In the case of Totonicapán, COP strategies were found to be more effective. This did not happen because of the police's adroitness in implementation, but rather because of its alignment with the traditional communal organization mechanisms, the so-called "48 Cantons" system.

GUATEMALAN DIVERSITY: A FUTURE FOR COP?

Our research shows the relationship between the police and the community takes place under different circumstances in Guatemala. In Totonicapán, the police is truly at the service of a well-organized community, and in Villa Canales the police is many times yet another actor within the same paradigm of insecurity endured by the local population. At such a local scale, a set of limited goals, like reduced crime, lower violence and peaceful coexistence can be fostered through stronger collaboration between the community and the police.

Guatemalan Cultural Diversity emerges as a special opportunity for COP. Alienation between the police and community is not complete in Guatemala. The respect or tolerance for local forms of governance that exists in places like Totonicapán could be turned into multicultural policing policy. COP provides the mechanisms for a joint consideration of what "security" can mean for both sides, so they become intelligible to each other and can agree on shared values such as peaceful coexistence, respect among groups, and also respect among individuals. Increased contact with the community to share information, analyze and plan together with the population and begin implementing COP strategies will contribute to increase accountability. When dealing with local-level security issues, the opportunity exists for common understandings, goal setting and meaning to be constructed. If this is too ambitious, at least the possibility exists for tolerance to be seen as a positive quality, rather than a sign of weakness to be overcome by an institution. This may be the space for real community policing in Guatemala.

More must be done to engage the general public with regards to the importance of changing the repressive understanding of security that pervades Guatemalan society. Providing information about MOPSIC's objectives, and the planning and execution of projects and activities can help to explain the changes in the philosophy and approach to policing that are taking place and prompt higher levels of trust and cooperation. This is to be understood as a long-term endeavor, but it may be the point of entry to the real fight for human security against repressive, authoritarian approaches of the past.

CONCLUSION

The process of introduction and implementation of COP strategies (MOPSIC in Guatemala) is far from over. The police institution is relatively new still, and its predecessor actively collaborated in systematic repression against the population during the armed conflict. Breaking with the narratives and paradigms of the authoritarian past will still take a significant amount of time.

MOPSIC implementation has strengthened respect and tolerance in police-community relations. But much remains to be done with respect to internal controls and citizen supervision of police activity. This notwithstanding, and unlike other police forces in the region, the Guatemalan PNC has not been pointed out as a systematic perpetrator of human rights violations in the past decade.

Further development of COP strategies is an opportunity to advance police reform in this difficult context. Civil society organizations specialized in matters of security should champion MOPSIC and bolster the reformist undercurrent that continues to exist within the PNC. International community actors, mainly the US under the new Biden administration, should redouble their commitment to strengthening democratic governance institutions, including preventative policies in the PNC, beyond their short-term migratory and narcotics trafficking control objectives.

LESSONS LEARNED

- The implementation of community-oriented policing (COP) strategies in the post-conflict, high-criminal-violence, low-trust and weak institutions context of Guatemala has been slow and only partially successful.
- As Guatemala achieves the average level of homicide rates in Latin America, there is new opportunity to foster in a new phase of police reform based on preventative strategies, including COP.
- The Integral Community Security Police Model (MOPSIC) has been sanctioned as official PNC regulation since 2014, being inspired on the community policing philosophy and police doctrine.
- The research found that in Villa Canales, municipality with high levels of violence, inefficient communal organization, and low interpersonal trust, COP strategies have been able to make footholds in the working with residents, but the amount of attention given to the population was insufficient, and monitoring capacities of the police were found to be negatively affected by the data management style of central policing offices.
- In the case of Totonicapán, an urban-rural municipality in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, with very low levels of violence, strong indigenous modes of social organization, and fair levels of interpersonal trust, COP strategies were found to be more effective.
- MOPSIC implementation has strengthened respect and tolerance in police-community relations. But much remains to be done with respect to internal controls and citizen supervision of police activity.
- Further development of COP strategies is an opportunity to advance police reform in this difficult context.

References

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Author Bio

Arturo Matute is an associated researcher of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Del Valle University of Guatemala. He has led violence prevention programmes based on the production of socioeconomic opportunities in the Central American region for international development agencies, has produced specialised information on citizen security through victimisation surveys and qualitative social research, and has worked as analyst for the International Crisis Group. He holds a master's degree in anthropology and development from the London School of Economics.

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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