

Pride of Place: Building Kenyan Policing From the Bottom Up

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Most Kenyans distrust or fear police officers, but examples of meaningful community policing can be found. Based on instances of good practice collected from three police stations in Nairobi, Kenya in August 2016, this brief identifies three key observations that may apply to police-community engagement elsewhere in Eastern Africa. In short, police officers are more important than the policing models under which they operate.

Kenyan policing is at a potentially critical juncture. Kenyan police officers have long been a byword for corruption, heavy-handed operations and extrajudicial killing, but the introduction in 2010 of a rights-based constitution and legislative framework raised public expectations of a new people-focused approach to policing.

At the same time, Kenyan society is marred by violent crime, unemployment, poverty, and endemic corruption. Policing the resultant tensions is particularly challenging in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya.

In the aftermath of 2013's terrorist attack on the Westgate shopping mall, new reforms and strategies were introduced in an effort to improve police-community relations. The 2020 constitution had already transformed the police, bringing together the Kenya Police Service and the Administration Police Service to form the National Police Service (NPS), and 2015 saw a new inspector general (chief officer), Joseph Boinett, emphasize his determination to create a people-centred police.

“Creating a people-centred police is my goal. An efficient police service must be centred on collaboration with the people”

This term is sometimes used synonymously with community policing by, for example, Kenya's National Task Force on Community Policing. The precise meaning of community policing, and whether it is a model or a philosophy of policing, is controversial but it is understood in this brief as referring to the proactive police-community engagement required for humane policing that meets the needs and constitutionally sanctioned rights of the Kenyan people.

Inevitably, many of the expectations raised by the introduction of strategies for recasting the NPS and improving its collaboration and partnership with local communities are unrealistic, and the police's record of delivering people-centred and/or community oriented policing is uneven. However, the picture

improves once attention is shifted down to the level of the station.

Improving Public Confidence

Everyday business in Nairobi's police stations and facilities cannot be romanticised, yet an annual competition conducted by the Kenyan Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA) shows that some officers are genuinely committed to serving residents, going about their duties with professionalism and integrity.¹ Three winners from IPOA's Outstanding Police Service Awards (OPSA) competition for 2016 illustrate this while making generic points about community policing that may also apply to police stations and facilities elsewhere in Kenya and eastern Africa.

The competition's value is that it identifies practical actions and concrete achievements, rather than aspirational values, and it reflects the views of the Kenyan public: the 50,000 nomination forms sent out in 2015 had a response rate of 40%. It includes categories such as the cleanest detention/holding facilities, though this brief focuses on those honored for stations providing community policing and for individual officers going the extra mile.²

Three of 2016's 46 winners were visited in August 2016, and each provides examples of good practice in helping to ensure humane, responsive and honest policing that increases public trust and confidence in

The Station Commander's Pivotal Role

The station at Athi River, a town in Machakos County, 26 km to the south of Nairobi, won the category of best operational community policing initiative. It fulfilled the competition's criteria by providing evidence of a thoughtful and structured approach to community policing, careful record keeping, and, most importantly, the commander's provision of leadership to both police and the community.

"The place to effect change should be at the station, bearing in mind that it is the point at which the public meets the police."

The critical point of change is at the station level because this is where the public meets the police, and in Athi River, as in the examples described below, everything is driven by the station commander, Chief Inspector Peter Kiema.

Kiema has a track record of taking residents' complaints seriously, working with the town's community policing group, involving local businessmen in self-supporting crime prevention schemes, identifying sponsors for unemployed youths, and, importantly, supporting and inspiring his team of officers. The OPSA trophy may be displayed in his office but he held an open party for officers and residents to celebrate its award, and several of his team were nominated by local people for 2017's competition.

Showing Initiative, Going the Extra Mile

Officers are nominated for the extra mile category because they have gone out of their way to make a difference in their locality, and two of 2016's winners illustrate important aspects of good practice in the Kenyan context. The first, Simon Kimuyu, deputy Officer Commanding Police Division (OCPD) in Ongata Rongai, a town 17 km southwest of Nairobi, emphasises the collaborative nature of community policing.

Kimuyu was nominated for his efforts to manage corruption, crime, and drug abuse. On arriving at Ongata Rongai in September 2015, he responded quickly and efficiently to complaints about children smoking bhang. His team, which is supported by the OCPD (a senior superintendent) and colleagues such as the head of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), works closely with officials from the government-sponsored community policing scheme known as Nyumba Kumi in the area's 63 clusters and, as importantly, with local youths, many of whom have significant criminal experience. The station provides the Ongata Youth Sports Association with

trophies and support, and personal observation suggests that the relationship works well.

Kimuyu says the public believe in him because as a parent he understands their problems, and his quick response prompts them to volunteer information.

"Not all police officers are people of dodgy characters [sic]. There are good men and women in the police force who are committed to serving the residents of this country and going about their duties with integrity."

In this way, his experience emphasises that community policing requires officers to respond quickly, and to establish a suitably professional working relationship with influential but potentially alienated groups such as youths. Critically, Kimuyu's commanding officer is supportive, as is the district's senior management team.

Honesty and Reliability

The second winner in this category, Chief Inspector Jennifer Mutuku from Pangani, a suburb to the north-east of Nairobi's central business district, offers a different perspective on community policing. In contrast to Rongai's broad-based and socially aware approach, Pangani's traffic division displays a functional focus that relies on the reputation, skills and integrity of the officer concerned. Mutuku's award offers a salutary reminder that policing communities may require sharply focused and technically proficient policing skills rather than partnership; respect can be more important than trust.

Pangani's traffic division is the busiest in Nairobi. The city's streets are notoriously congested and many of the obstructions are caused by matatus (the privately owned minibuses that most Kenyans rely on). Other common offences include overloading and the lack of uniforms, PSV licenses or badges, and the division arrests many drivers and conductors, a high percent of whom are remanded for failing to raise the cash needed for bail.

Mutuku operates at the heart of these issues. Popularly known as Bensouda after the International Criminal Court's fearless Gambian chief prosecutor, she has developed a working relationship with the drivers and companies based on her refusal to take bribes. According to one tout, "she is always intimidating, maybe because she is huge. Bensouda has made life unbearable, we prefer dealing with officers who can take something small and allow us to do work instead of the long court processes."

Her response is straightforward: “I am strict and hard on them, I arrest and take them straight to court.”³ And some drivers prefer this because it means that they know where they stand with her. Targeting a specific sector or community can in this way result in effective and efficient policing.



Chief Inspector Peter Kiema, Athi River Station Commander, with the trophy for “Best Operational Community Policing Initiative’

Key Lessons

- Reliable and honest officers are more important than high-level strategies or imported policing models
- The critical point of change is at the station level because this is where policing practices and values and trust levels are actually determined
- Everyday policing practices depend on the attitude of the station’s commander and senior officers
- In violent or unsympathetic environments, good practices requires officers to show initiative and go the extra mile

Conclusions

IPOA’s annual award for outstanding service provides insight into what Kenya’s citizens regard as good community policing. It suggests that good practice is essentially a personal achievement, albeit one in which the officer concerned is supported by colleagues. In all cases, the attitude of the officer commanding the station concerned is critical; corrupt officers preside over corrupt stations while those with integrity and professional skills inspire junior officers to emulate their approach. In short, everything depends upon a supportive commanding officer.

There are no easy answers to the question of how to institutionalize good practice in unsympathetic environments, but it is clear that high-level strategies need to be balanced by practical and routine measures at the local level because this is where policing standards are most visible. The task is as challenging for technically developed police in regional leaders such as Kenya as for the underdeveloped police found in post-conflict countries.

Overall, Athi River, Rongai and Pangani offer an important generic lesson: meaningful community policing requires honest and reliable officers rather than accountable or transparent policing models. In other words, officers matter more than policing models.

Notes

- 1) Established in 2011, IPOA provides civilian oversight, auditing and monitoring in the interest of the public. IPOA, ‘Home’. <<http://www.ipoa.go.ke/>>
- 2) IPOA, Outstanding Police Service Awards. 2 July 2016. <<http://www.ipoa.go.ke/event/outstanding-police-service-awards-opsa/>>.
- 3) Standard Digital, ‘Cop “Bensouda” has put the brakes on mata-tu madness’, 31 May 2013. <<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000084899/cop-bensoudahas-put-the-brakes-on-matatu-madness>>

Author Bio

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She earned her PhD in War Studies from the University of London, was a professor of conflict and security at the University of Leeds, and has taught at the UK’s Joint Services Command and Staff College.

Hills says: “I am indebted to the Independent Police Oversight Authority (IPOA), whose support made this research possible. The views offered are nonetheless mine alone.”

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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