Crime Prevention Approaches in Africa

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A. State Policing and Crime Prevention Efforts in Africa

Prominent among different measures adopted by African countries to reduce or prevent crimes are efforts to establish the rule of law, criminal justice systems and police forces (UNODC, 2009). Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, Kenya and many other countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, have long established police forces with crime prevention mandates, among other duties (Van Der Spuy & Röntsch, 2008).

In Nigeria for example, despite proclaimed reforms by successive governments, there has been little improvement in crime-fighting efforts (Van Der Spuy & Röntsch, 2008). Growing allegations of corruption and incompetence in crime fighting have been continually levelled against the Nigeria Police (Hills, 2008), compelling the government to establish some security and anti-corruption agencies such as the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC), the State Security Service (SSS), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (Odekunle, 2004; Obuah, 2010). In addition to these, Nigeria has embarked on several security programmes and projects. For instance, in collaboration with the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), Nigeria launched its Security, Justice and Growth (SJG) programme in 2002 to address core issues of security and access to justice. The programme was successful, ending in 2010 with most of its objectives achieved (DFID, 2010).

In 2008, the government of Ghana signed a 12.5 million US Dollars financing agreement with the European Commission to enable the Police Service to embark on a massive recruitment drive and increase the number of cops on the beat. Also, Ghana’s judicial service rolled out aggressive judicial reforms. It adopted court automation, built more law courts, appointed more judges and established weekend courts to expedite the pace of justice (Integrated Regional Information Networks, IRIN, 2008).

South Africa in 1996 established the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS). The Strategy was designed to rebuild the Criminal Justice system to ensure appropriate sentencing and an effective criminal justice process. It also focused on a public education programme, community policing, a victim empowerment programme, and sustained care for juveniles, among other objectives (Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, 2015; South African Government, 2015). However, the campaign failed to achieve its objectives because of its many shortcomings (see Masiza & Ntlokonkulu, 2002; Newhan, 2005; Van Der Spuy & Röntsch, 2008). In 2009, the South African president promised to boost the police from 183,000 to 205,000 in three years but there were doubts that this would reduce the South African crime rate significantly (The Economist, 2009).

State policing in African states has failed to meet the aspirations of citizens because of inherent historical, cultural, ideological, economic and political challenges. This failure has its roots in the colonial experience of indirect rule, which gave the power to maintain law and order
in communities to traditional rulers and their agencies (Killingray, 1986). With examples in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Kenya and Northern Rhodesia, Killingray (1986) observed that under this system, the Native Police Authority or Tribal Messengers under the control of the traditional rulers were responsible for the maintenance of law and order, while the Government Police Force was a micro establishment with minimal control at the city centres. This failure to assume full control eventually culminated in arbitrary rule and the forceful migration of some people into other areas. The same method was adopted at independence by the countries concerned, although other security bodies were also established with an expansion of the police and military. The system did little to prevent fragmentation, as it depended on expressions of loyalty centred on regional and communal, rather than on national, identity (Marenin, 2009).

Over time, this phenomenon has culminated in full blown political and economic crises in some African countries, such as Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Southern Sudan, where various interests and ethnic leaders constantly manipulate the weaknesses of the state apparatus to establish control. Marenin (2009) has highlighted some basic problems that confront the state police in most African countries. These problems, which emanate from the historical conditions highlighted above, include the lack of operational and occupational autonomy; weak professional ethics or standards as a result of inherent colonial mentalities; a negative public perception of the police as corrupt, brutal and inefficient; the lack of public acceptability and legitimacy of the state; abuse of power; weak national identities; lack of resources; corruption; and inefficient management.

The continued failure of state agencies to prevent crime is the most likely reason for the increasing recourse to non-state actors in Africa. Baker (2010) listed these actors to include vigilante groups, religious police, ethnic or clan militias, civil defence forces, semi-commercial anti-crime groups, work-based security groups, local government security structures, customary structures, and restorative justice community-based organizations or peace committees. To these one should add fully commercial security providers and the varieties of crime prevention practices organised informally by communities in Africa. As a result, vigilantism and community policing (self-policing) operate in many African States alongside and in competition with ineffectual state policing (Hills, 2011).

Hills (2009) identified the specific challenges that undermine internal security and limit the effectiveness of the state police in some African States. In Uganda, the researcher observed that crime detection and prevention are a mirage because most of the police stations do not have case files, or even the transport and communication facilities needed for effective policing. Training and re-training are substandard, commitment to work is very low as there are no programmes for job motivation.

In Ethiopia, the ease with which ordinary citizens have access to guns makes it difficult for the police to effectively prevent insecurity. In addition, the fact that police or army posts are located far away has made it possible for Islamic fundamentalists in Oromoo and parts of Somalia to perpetuate religious tensions and banditry. Persistent and increasing unemployment, economic stagnation, and poor strategic planning, are grossly affecting the effectiveness of state policing.

The researchers observed that Namibia and South Africa (after apartheid) have similar problems. Namibia at independence hurriedly adopted the structure and leadership of the old South West African Police (SWAPOL) in the new NAMPOL. But this was little more than camouflage because in reality the police were grossly under-funded. Officers exhibited low
morale and high absenteeism because they were not inappropriately trained or promoted. The situation was better however in South Africa.

State policing in Somalia is severely affected by politically-motivated ethnic and factional militia groups who perpetuate chronic extortion and an economy of plunder using conflict and mobilisation. Somalia has a small population of only about five million, large expanses of land with very long distances between urban areas, scarce resources and ethnic rivalry between the North and South, making it difficult for the state to effectively maintain law and order. The situation has encouraged the growth of many militia groups that enforce order in their respective territories. This fragmentation of control across clans and lineage makes it easy for teenagers and young adults to inordinately impose their will and plunder both traders and citizens.

B. Community-Based Crime Prevention Practices in Africa

Community-based crime prevention (CBCP) practices are prevalent in Africa, with different structures, names, as well as different degrees of state involvement and formalisation. Community policing, neighbourhood watches, vigilantes, police partnership boards, are some of the names describing the different forms of CBCP in Africa. In the review that follows, we focus on three African countries which present an arguably representative variety of CBCP in Africa. Tanzania, for instance, has one of the oldest traditional CBCP, the Sungusungu. South Sudan is emerging from a prolonged crisis that has stretched its official policing mechanism and capacity beyond the breaking point, while South Africa has high crime rates but relatively sophisticated forms of CBCP.

CBCP in Tanzania

Tanzania is famous for Sungusungu, an old movement intended to ward off cattle raiding, and also for ulinzi shirikishi which is an adaptation of Sungusungu (Cross, 2013; Fleisher, 2000; Heald, 2000; Michael, 2000; Heald, 2009). Sungusungu became a state-sponsored vigilante form of CBCP in Tanzania after many years of informal existence, whereas ulinzi shirikishi is a state concept and idea. While the Tanzanian state has allowed Sungusungu groups to codify their own laws and exact their own forms of punishment, ulinzi shirikishi operates within the framework of state security law (Cross, 2013).

It is on record that during the ‘peak’ period of Sungusungu interventions, in the late 1980’s, the rates of mugging and robbery dropped in the country by 60% and 72% respectively, with a 20% drop in burglaries and a 24% drop in assault cases (Shadrack, 2000). Cross (2013) notes that although community policing in Tanzania was found to facilitate crime prevention and make residents feel safer in their neighbourhoods, it was not necessarily more accountable or responsive than state policing. In some areas, Sungusungu members have been accused of the same failings frequently attributed to the state police: soliciting bribes, wrongful arrest, using excessive force and lacking sensitivity when dealing with the public (Cross, 2013). Nevertheless, the Sungusungu enabled communities to take back power and have heralded a new vision of community responsibility for local safety and security while its legalisation has acted as a check on their excesses (Heald, 2009).
CBCP in South Sudan

As an emerging post-conflict state, South Sudan does not have adequate capacity and structures to deal with organized crime and criminality and this hampers her state and nation-building endeavours (Mbugua, 2012). The adoption of community policing as a CBCP approach tends to be favoured by some stakeholders in South Sudan to address the issue of insecurity. These include the South Sudan Police Service and other local and international actors.

The framework for CBCP is set out in the 2009 South Sudan Police Act. However, currently there is no common understanding or definition of community policing in South Sudan. It is spoken of in terms of Police Community Relations Committees or voluntary community police officers. In the South Sudan context, CBCP could therefore be understood as having an institutional approach and philosophy, as well as an auxiliary or supplementary police capacity at the local level.

It is not uncommon to experience problems with implementing community-based security reforms in a post-war context like South Sudan. In its post-war history, South Sudan has a range of actors, both local and international, with different understandings and definitions of CBCP, especially community policing. The obviously complex context in which it is implemented also presents a difficult hurdle.

CBCP in South Africa

A common type of CBCP in South Africa is the neighbourhood watch scheme which operates in partnership with the South African Police Service, the Community Policing Forum, local authorities, and private security service providers. The National Crime Prevention Centre in South Africa (2000) produced a manual to guide local authorities in designing their own crime prevention plans. The design includes sections such as the need for a community crime prevention strategy, the state of communication infrastructure and community participation, and how to plan and implement a crime prevention strategy.

Baker (2002) submitted that the challenges of the state police’s inadequate resources, training and institutional accountability has made non-state policing thrive in South Africa, as citizens have had to make their own provisions to guarantee their right to freedom and personal security. But non-state policing has been only slightly effective in complementing the efforts of the state police in ensuring safety in the communities. It has also led to more social isolation in communities, where non-state volunteers have discriminated against minorities, and to a rise in illegal possession of weapons, leading to more violence. It has also negatively affected criminal justice and promoted inequality in access and adjudication of security and justice.

The effectiveness of CBCP in South Africa seems to be undermined by the tension in the expected roles of the police and CBCP actors. The police would want CBCP actors to be intelligence gatherers while the actors would wish for a more amenable police force (Brogden & Nijhar, 2005). Mutual interracial suspicions and cleavages as well as crises of legitimacy also compromise the effectiveness of CBCP in South Africa (Brogden & Nijhar, 2005; Owen & Cooper-Knock, 2014).
Summary

In summary, CBCP practices in Africa are indeed widely prevalent with evidence that they sometimes have a positive impact on security in the society. CBCP actors, especially vigilante groups, provide intelligence and join the police in crime fighting. They are sometimes quickly mobilised in times of emergency (Olaniyi, 2005; Fourchard, 2008; Hills, 2008; Van Der Spuy & Röntsch, 2008; DFID Nigeria’s Security, Justice and Growth Programme, 2010; Holmer, 2014). In fact, in many communities, local vigilantes have won the local legitimacy that the police seem to have lost (Hills, 2008; Pratten, 2008). However, there is evidence to suggest that CBCP often performs below the expectations of both government and citizens in Africa. One of the major failures of CBCP in many African countries is that while they may be effective in reducing petty thievery and even homicides and armed robbery, in many cases they replace these crimes others, notably mob justice and a general abuse of citizens’ rights (Baker, 2002; Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004; Brogden & Nijhar, 2005). In addition to this, some CBCP often isolate segments of the community – foreigners, those from other ethnic groups - and even provoke the use of violence (Baker, 2008). Some actors, especially vigilante groups, have become security threats in themselves and sometimes include criminals in their ranks (IRIN, 2008; Adigwe, 2013; Al-Akhbar, 2013; Holmer, 2014).