

# **Community Partnership in Policing: The Nigerian Experience**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

*In the face of police inability to stem surging crime waves, the people of Nigeria are turning from formal law enforcement agencies to informal ethnic militia groups for protection. Events in the recent past corroborate this fact as similar trends are recorded across the country. From the south-west to the south-east and south-south the Oodua Peoples' Congress, the Bakassi Boys and the Egbesu Boys have had to virtually take over the functions of the conventional police force. However, the relationship between the police and these ethnic militia groups is often anything but cordial and the brunt of this nasty relationship is usually borne by the people to whom the police owe the duty to protect. Some identified causes of the unpleasant relationship are the constitution and modus operandi of these groups. This paper is aimed at examining the history of community partnership in policing drawing some lessons from the Nigerian experience, while making suggestions for the effective partnership between the police and community members which is the kernel of community policing.*

## **Introduction**

The place of crime prevention in any society can not be over-emphasized. Traditionally, the maintenance of law and order in any society is usually the exclusive role of conventional police and other law enforcement agents. In Nigeria, the history of crime prevention can be broadly divided into three main categories/classifications viz; pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial epochs. The pre-colonial forms of policing include cults, secret societies, messengers and palace guards (**Marenin, 1985**). The pre-colonial era in crime prevention in Nigeria was characterized by indigenous institutions responsible for crime fighting. Then, in the absence of codified laws, the social structure provided the necessary basis for the regulation of the behaviour of members of the society. In different parts of the country, there were various institutions responsible for crime prevention.

In centralized state systems, for example, among the Yoruba-speaking people of southwestern Nigeria and the Hausa-Fulani of the Emirate North, the function of crime fighting and law enforcement was left to some individuals drawn from palace guards (**Rotimi, 2001**). Among the more acephalous communities, for example, the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, placed lots of emphasis on traditions, customs, and other unwritten laws in their interpretations of the concept of law (**Okafor, 2006; Onyeozili, 2005**). In all, the common index was the fact that throughout the country, the conduct of the citizens was regulated by indigenous laws which they were quite familiar with.

In the colonial epoch, the style and principles of policing have been described as anti-people by several authors (**Rotimi, 2001; Okafor, 2006; Chukwuma and Alemika, 2000; Ikuteyijo, 2009**). In fact the establishment of the colonial police was more to serve and protect the commercial interest of the colonial masters. This pitched the police against the people they were meant to protect and there were series of clashes between both parties. Moreover, the colonial Nigerian police, operating under the philosophy of ‘strangers policing strangers’ (**Rotimi, 2001**), were oriented to enforce codified British laws with little effort to adapt these laws to the Nigerian context.

The post-colonial Nigeria Police Force is a carry over from the colonial epoch. This is evident in the style of law enforcement used by the post colonial police in the daily discharge of their duties. Some have opined that the post-colonial Nigerian police also serve the interests of their financiers and nothing better can be expected from them for as the saying goes “he who pays the piper dictates the tune”. The post-colonial policing epoch in Nigeria has since witnessed a myriad of reforms one of which is the concept of community policing which was popularized by the former Inspector General of Police, Tafa Balogun and launched on April 27, 2004, by former President Olusegun Obasanjo.

Community policing entails community partnership in creating a safe and secure environment for all. It is policing whereby the people take active part in their own affairs. With community policing, the police is not seen as a stranger whose presence stands for danger and imminent hazard but as partners in development. The unfriendly nature of the relationship between

the police and members of the public has enjoyed a wide coverage among scholars. It was in reaction to this development that the concept of community policing was introduced. This is particularly the case in Nigeria where the informal ethnic militia groups contested policing space with the Nigerian police in the early years of the Fourth Republic which began in May 1999 (**Ikuteyijo, 2009**).

### **Theoretical Overview**

The theoretical underpinning that has been used to explain the concept of community policing is the Broken Windows Theory, hereafter referred to as BWT. This theory was popularized by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in an article which appeared in the March 1982 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*. The BWT suggests that public order offences like vandalism and rowdy behaviour can create a downward spiral of neighbourhood deterioration and fear of crime that leads to more deterioration and more serious crimes if not checked by the community. This is because little crimes like vandalism, broken windows, and others tend to portray the impression that *nobody cares* about the community and that residents as well as the police have lost control over the community. On the other hand, increased police presence and enforcements of informal rules of conduct and laws can make a community seem less chaotic and safer thereby increased presence and involvement of residents in their community and lowering crime rates (**Palmiotto, 2000**). The BWT can be incorporated into the concept of community policing in the sense that collective effort by both the police and community dwellers can help alleviate the rate of crime in the community as the police see residents as partners in development and vice versa. In line

with the Yoruba adage that says “the insect that destroys the vegetable resides right inside the vegetable,” the BWT assumes that most neighbourhood crimes are more often than not perpetrated by offenders who reside near the victims; this makes crime primarily a local problem which can best be solved locally. The BWT is very useful in explaining the synergy between the police and the community in crime detection but contemporary developments have belittled the effectiveness of the theory as some crimes are perpetrated by people who are not domiciled in the environment of the crime. An example is cyber crime, where victims are not necessarily close to the criminals; in fact they are usually miles away from one another.

### **Police Reforms in Nigeria and their Effectiveness**

The history of police reforms in Nigeria has been an interesting one in the sense that since the nation transitioned to democratic rule in 1999, the police have set and reset different number of reforms in what has become a popular parlance among Nigeria’s policy makers. However, most of the reforms have been described as representing the interests of the government of the day rather than serving the interests of the public they are meant to protect (Hills, 2008). For instance, Police reforms formed one of the major areas of priority of the Obasanjo-led administration between 1999 and 2007 (Arase and Iwuofor, 2007; Abati, 2008). Smith, the first Inspector General of Police (IGP) under the new democratic dispensation, launched a 6-point agenda aimed at redeeming the “lost glory” of the police as well as improvement in the welfare of officers. There was also assistance from other countries like the British and American governments, which assisted in the

setting up of the Network on Police Reform in Nigeria (NOPRIN). The police however suffered a major setback during this period as the nation witnessed its first ever police strike with several police officers downing tools in protest against accumulated years of neglect of welfare and material needs. The police also lost many of its officers to high crime wave especially in violent crimes like armed robbery, etc. Balogun took over from Smith and he immediately came up with his 8-point agenda popularized by the slogan “Fire for Fire” given the casualty figures among policemen who were felled by armed robbers’ bullets due to the high rate of insecurity enveloping the country at that time. In 2005, Ehindero launched his 10-point agenda with prime attention paid to police accountability and capacity building. He changed the more militaristic slogan of “Fire for Fire” to a more democratic one “To serve and protect with integrity”. His successor, Mike Okiro came up with a 9-point agenda in 2007, while Onovo (incumbent IGP) declared a 3-point agenda in 2009. Hills (*ibid.*) has suggested that though reforms could make a normative and organizational difference in the Nigerian Police, the effects of such reforms would be “superficial, localized and temporary” in the absence of fundamental socio-political change. Also, Abati (2008) observed that “...one lesson that we have learnt is that when government talks about police reform or when every new Inspector General waves the banner of reform, they do so merely as an attention-grabbing gesture and as an opportunity to spend more money and award contracts”. Needless to say then that the problem of police-community relations is not one that will be addressed by *political* declarations but through sincere efforts of all stakeholders in the business of securing a safe environment for all.

## **Police Community Relations in Nigeria**

The history of community police relation in Nigeria has been described as frosty as the idea of policing imposed on the country by the colonial masters was calculated to foster an antagonism between the policed and the police (**Alemika and Chukwuma, 2000; Onoja, 2007; Tamuno, 1970**). Rotimi (2001) explicates the reasons for the police-citizens feuds in the colonial times and notes that since the police stood as the symbol of authority, which were responsible for the enforcement of most government policies like the collection of taxes and enforcement of traffic regulations, they were usually at loggerheads with members of the public. Unfortunately, the no-love lost relationship between the police and the public extends to the post-colonial era. Relationships between the Nigerian police and citizens are largely characterized by suspicion, prejudice, mutual disrespect, conflict and violence (**Alemika and Chukwuma, 2000**). It has equally been noted that it will be very difficult for any police organization to succeed in its objective of maintenance of law and order without the cooperation of the people being policed. To solve this dilemma, therefore, there must be not only a cordial relationship between the police and the citizens, but also be a working partnership between them if the laudable goals are to be achieved.

## **Community Policing in Nigeria**

Community policing is a term which has been defined in many ways by different scholars but the central theme is the collaboration of efforts between the police and members of the public in combating crime and the fear of crime. In Nigeria, community policing was introduced in 2003 when some police officers were sent to England courtesy of the British



Department for International Development (DFID) to understudy community policing as practised in the UK. Consequently, in 2004, more officers were trained as Community Development Officers (CDP) in Enugu, southeastern Nigeria. These officers were asked to spread the message of community policing to other officers in other states of the federation (Dickson, 2007). It is noteworthy however, that community policing as practised in the UK is definitely not applicable to the Nigerian context without necessary adjustments given the long-standing antagonism between the police and the public. For instance, Dickson (ibid.) has noted some impediments to the successful implementation of community policing in Nigeria and they include internal resistance by policemen who benefited from the traditional policing and who prefer to maintain the *status quo*; lack of commitment to the project by implementing officers; lack of support from members of the public; inadequate support from the government; and poor welfare package/incentives for policemen. However, one of the biggest impediments to the success of community policing in Nigeria is the hostile relationship between the police and the informal policing machinery usually made up of some factions of ethnic militia groups in the country.

### **Police and Ethnic Militia Relationship in Nigeria**

There are many arms-bearing groups in Nigeria, most of which transformed into various militia groups with ethnic undertones. In the wake of rising crime rates in most parts of the country and the seeming inability of the formal police to arrest the situation, the local vigilante groups comprising mostly members of ethnic militias came to the rescue of most Nigerian communities.

In the south western parts of Nigeria, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), which was initially formed to fight the marginalization of the Yoruba tribe, particularly after the annulment of the June 12 presidential elections purportedly won by a Yoruba man, later became a notable security outfit. Members of the OPC, being entrenched in Yoruba ancestral tradition, are widely acknowledged to master magical techniques of defense, attack or divination - warranted by oath-taking ceremonies of new recruits. This singular characteristic grants them a substantial comparative advantage in security and crime fighting activities. Additionally, OPC's services are more affordable than those of formal private security outfits. OPC militants have thus been appointed by zonal coordinators to perform security activities at fixed rates (**Akinyele**, 2001; **Guichaoua**, 2009).

In fact, at a point in time, Lagos, Oyo, and some other states governments publicly requested for their assistance at fighting crime. The general perception is that the police are corrupt, inefficient, ill equipped and unreliable while the militias are incorruptible and efficient. In June 2001, the Governor of Lagos State, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, publicly announced his willingness to invite the OPC to assist the state to combat criminals who seemed to have overwhelmed the Police in Lagos State (**Babawale**, 2001).

Also, in the eastern parts of the country, the Bakassi Boys, initially formed by a group of artisans to protect themselves from incessant attacks from robbers also became a celebrated security outfit. Some state governments even legitimized the Bakassi outfit, e.g in Anambra state the state House of Assembly enacted the Anambra Vigilance Services Act in 2001.

In the south-south, the Egbesu Boys and several other groups were formed with the initial aim of protesting the environmental degradation as well as economic and political marginalization taking place in that area. Most of these groups, like the Niger Delta Liberation Force and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), were at various points in time engaged by the state governments to assist in the security of lives and property in the area.

However, there have been frequent clashes between the police and these groups. Basically, the operation and constitution of most of these groups put them in confrontation with the police. Besides the crude means of crime detection used by these groups, the instant judgment meted out to their victims also pitches them against the police who are to ensure the maintenance of law and order and enforce the human rights of all citizens irrespective of their offences. Most of the literature on community policing ignore, or rather under estimate, the importance of these groups in crime detection and enforcement. This may be explained by the fact that the UK whose model of community policing Nigeria is trying to adopt does not have such challenge of ethnic militias. This is a major area which must be looked into if the project of community policing is to survive in Nigeria. The conflict of interests between the police and the various groups must be well addressed and put in the right perspective.

### **Importance of Community Partnership in Policing**

Effective community policing has a positive impact on reducing neighborhood crime, helping to reduce fear of crime and enhancing the quality of life in the community. Since neither the police nor the criminal justice system can bear the responsibility of ensuring a safe and secure community alone (**Skolnick and Bayley**, 1988), the public has a very active role to play in ensuring public safety. Community partnership in policing has many merits and it promises to deliver the needed peace and safety of communities if well implemented. It can lead to more effective policing whereby the police will do their job better and in a safer environment devoid of suspicion and risks. It will also foster mutual respect between police and community dwellers as they will perceive one another in the right perspectives and as partners in development. It will also lead to quicker resolution of crimes as the community members would readily volunteer to offer information to the police without any suspicion of reprisal attacks from criminal gangs. Overall, community partnership in policing will lead to safer community for all and sundry. The partnership in crime fighting between the community and the police will also alleviate the frequent feuds between the police and local ethnic militia groups. The local government has a big role to play in this aspect as they can serve as regulators of the activities of local vigilante groups and other informal police groups. The local groups are more familiar with the environment and they are usually more accepted to members of the public as the police are often portrayed in bad light.

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