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Policing communal conflicts: The state, parallel security providers, and communities

Police forces in Nigeria have struggled to maintain the confidence of the public as the incidence of communal conflict across Nigeria since 1999 has risen. This has led to a proliferation of parallel security bodies and the emergence of particularistic vigilante groups, which threaten to continue to undermine police authority. This brief outlines how these parallel security structures in Nigeria can co-operate to reduce incidences of communal conflict while strengthening public security institutions. It concludes with best practice recommendations to support better training of police officers, to gather better intelligence through stronger community engagement, and to ensure better representativeness and local accountability through more inclusive security forces.

The challenge

The incidence of communal conflict across Nigeria since 1999 has posed a particular challenge to security agencies – particularly the police who, as prime civil security agency, bear the main constitutional responsibility for detecting and defusing them. Communal conflicts produce a particular kind of security problem that requires a particular kind of approach. An approach based on timely intervention, effective deterrence, and – best of all – prevention. This can only be successfully undertaken with the trust and involvement of the wider public. Where trust is low, security agencies can only be of limited effectiveness, and publics often turn to other forms of self-provided security. Yet such arrangements are no lasting substitute for an effective police force. The challenge for the Nigeria Police Force, other security agencies, and external partners, is to work effectively with local stakeholders to reinforce a security system that is both state-centric[i] and genuinely accountable to the public. The deliberate targeting of police officers and other members of state security forces by Islamist militants is a dire warning of the extreme consequences possible when relations between the police and the public break down.

Background

Under a civilian government, the police bear the prime responsibility for the maintenance of law and order. However, a critical examination of communal conflicts in Nigeria shows that they have often faced severe challenges in doing so. Primarily focussed on combating everyday crime, police resources are often overstretched and at low capacity, or not held in high esteem by local stakeholders. When conflict escalates, police – especially in remote rural areas – are often quickly overwhelmed. Such situations then require either the intervention of Mobile Police squadrons, or more decisively, the army. But these are crude tools for conflict management and indicate a nonfunctional system. Better pre-emption of conflict is needed. Well-known studies[ii] have established that conflict can be a cyclical 'trap' where instability leads to further episodes of breakdown; so conflict prevention should be seen as a long-term historical investment.

Police and other security agencies' problems in managing conflict are self-reinforcing. In situations where publics have low trust in the police or lack confidence in their abilities to intervene successfully, they often fail to report crime or other important intelligence. The state's failings encourage communities, factions, or identity groups to provide their own security, in the form of vigilance organisations or militias. Once established, these can become permanent interest groups and constituencies, which can exacerbate problems. Nigeria experienced an explosion of vigilance organisations and other parallel security provid-

ers since the 1990s. Since then, their most excessive manifestations have been curbed, and many parallel security actors have become regularised into familiar features of the Nigerian social and institutional landscape. In some Muslim majority states, like Kano, the paramilitary Hisbah is an official arm of the newly instituted Sharia legal system. Yet vigilance and other non-state security organisations remain a problematic presence – although they are often popular and effective in curbing crime, their summary punishments can be extreme. Equally, vigilante groups can be particularistic, and may even be misused as political or ethnic militias.

Some Nigerian commentators have called for the establishment of separate police forces for each state of the federation, arguing that more locally accountable police forces would perform better than the current centralised arrangement. Others contest this, pointing to cost implications and claiming that the establishment of separate forces would become politicised and have negative implications for national unity. Some state governors argue that they already finance a substantial part of the policing costs for their states. In the absence of independent forces, some state governors have used their constitutional mandates as Chief Security Officers of their respective states to institute and equip special task-force style security forces. These are usually dedicated

regroupings of personnel of existing federal institutions such as the police, military and other uniformed bodies such as National Security and Civil Defence. Examples of such groupings include Kaduna's Operation Yaki and Lagos State's (police) Rapid Response Squad.

The Nigeria Police Force has repositioned itself in response to these developments. It has legally contested the efforts of some parallel institutions, such as Kano State's Hisbah, to become government-backed police forces. For some time now, it has also worked with vigilante groups to register them and their members, in some areas issuing identity cards and engaging in joint patrols. It has also instituted a system of 'back-to-state' postings, which seek to post new police constables back to their state of origin so that there will be a more organic link between officers and the publics they serve. However, the popularity of vigilante groups and their summary punishments has also promoted what we may term 'police vigilantism', whereby police are encouraged to adopt summary methods instead of formal legal procedure. Yet at the same time, informal methods can also include effective negotiated conflict management. Much more can – and needs to – be done to enhance effective law-enforcement collaboration between state security providers, parallel security institutions, and communities.

Strengths and weaknesses

The benefits of a close working relationship between official and parallel security providers and the community are clear: greater trust, enhanced capacity to detect and prevent crime and conflict, and better intelligence and early warning capability. This is vital in situations of potential conflict where prevention is much more desirable, effective and achievable than cure. However, there are also problems inherent in forming such relationships that must be considered when designing new institutional arrangements. Key among these are the considerations of *representativeness* and *accountability*. Both official forces and informal-sector security institutions need to be formed in a manner representative of whole communities, not just sectional parts of them, lest security forces dominated by particular identity-groups become contributors to conflict, rather than to its prevention. Equally, they need to be broadly accountable to publics, rather than narrowly accountable to particular elites, office-holders or individuals, otherwise their use can quickly become politicised and divisive.

Modes of co-operation

Modes of co-operation between communities and security institutions can vary widely.

At one end of the spectrum, there have become 'no go' communities for police – for example, one in Kogi State, and another in Akwa Ibom, where such breakdowns in relations occurred after a riot following the death of a local youth in a confrontation with police. In such situations, state security agencies find themselves only able to intervene with the consent of residents, or by deploying large operations. In areas subject to the Boko Haram insurgency, police and other security agents find their everyday operations even more severely constrained.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are locations where careful police management and a supportive community have resulted in all stakeholders working well together. In Agege, Lagos State, individuals and businesses in the community have even self-funded the building of a new police station via the very active Police Community Relations Committee.

In between these extremes are locations where the police, communities, and informal or parallel security providers have found occasional points of contact and limited modes of working together. In Jos, Plateau State, in 2007 police issued identity cards to screened members of neighbourhood vigilance groups, and were conducting joint night-time patrols of vulnerable areas.

Yet there are pitfalls, even in regulating and recognising the activities of vigilantes. Police officers in one field location, where officially-recognised vigilantes were registered by the police and paid directly by the Local Government Chairman, complained that some members saw their politically-backed position as placing them above the law – making it hard for the police to bring them to account for their own abuses, and that they sometimes also abused such offices to settle political scores, sometimes fatally. Police have also found themselves hampered by deep divisions within small communities; on another occasion, a community policing programme aimed at building relations with community youths was suspended at the request of older political leaders who feared that the presence of so many youths in an organised forum might be directed against them. Such dynamics mean new initiatives need to be carefully designed, and based on research.

Best practice recommendations

- **Include police in conflict prevention planning:** Effective and responsive state security agencies are a decisive factor in conflict prevention. Police responsiveness is often impaired by a variety of factors, including aversion to risk. This is compounded by their being sidelined from policy formation and decisions. Therefore, in order to build com-

> **Box 3: Rebuilding trust through better intelligence and alternative dispute management**
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> One divisional police officer in Osun State, who had a good public reputation for fighting armed robbery, overcame the public's reluctance to give information to local police (for fear of becoming suspects themselves) by using community leaders as interlocutors, and relying on them to reassure and bring forward witnesses and information. The police can further build on this trust by engaging in alternative dispute resolution on an everyday basis. When parties bring a dispute to the police, officers may encourage them to 'settle' with each other and use the threat of prosecution as an alternative. The police then record the outcome and can use it to refer to and take further action if the problem recurs.

munication, coherence and confidence, police and other state security agencies should be included and mainstreamed in conflict prevention planning by the government and international development partners concerned with conflict prevention and management.

- **Strengthen community engagement in policing:** Nigeria has a system of Police Community Relations Committees at the level of each Police Division. In some areas they are very active and in others semi-dormant[iii]. All stakeholders in communities at risk of conflict should be encouraged to send representatives to these committees in order to communicate their views and to help provide police with resources and information they need to operate effectively for all stakeholders. State governments and international development partners should pay more attention to the operation of these committees. However, to maintain community accountability, state governments and development partners should not get involved in the funding of PCRCs. Where they work, the committees function as a direct fiscal support link between the community and police, allowing community members to provide the resources for their own policing priorities. Additionally, consultation should be a central part of police planning, beyond simply occasional 'town hall meeting' events. Donors

> **Box 4: Spreading best practice internally**
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> It is not only development partners who are interested in changing relations between police and communities in conflict. In the conflict-prone city of Jos, many residents had low faith in the police after successive episodes of violence, and the army were a more popular security force. So police leadership in the state brought in trainers within the force, who had themselves been trained by the DfID-supported British Council Community Policing management training project, to run courses on community policing strategies for officers of the state command. This was done at the police's own initiative and after the close of the donor-supported project.

Further readings:

CLEEN Foundation. 20078. Motions without movement: Report of Presidential Committees on Police Reform in Nigeria. Lagos, CLEEN.

Hills, A. 2012. Policing a Plurality of Worlds: The Nigeria Police in Metropolitan Kano African Affairs Vol 111 (442).

Owen, O. 2012. An Institutional ethnography of the Nigeria Police Force. Unpublished DPhil thesis, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Oxford.

Online resources:
Discussion of relationship between community security and insurgency: http://bit.ly/149dYDN

Nigerian Police Force: http://www.npf.gov.ng

Nigerian Police Services Commission: http://www.psc.gov.ng/

Nigeria Police Watch: http://www.nigeriapolicewatch.com/

Network on Police Reform in Nigeria: http://www.noprin.org

Nigerian national crime victimisation surveys: http://bit.ly/YDK9TN

For contact details and publications of researchers involved in the Nigeria Research Network (NRN), see: www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/nrn/

can play a part in facilitating public security consultations by State Police Commands and state governments and their feed into security planning – currently no state has a strategic policing policy with clear priorities, identified resource needs and targets.

- **Support more on-the-job training for junior officers:** Many police officers lack essential skills in documenting crime and presenting cases, which mean that prosecutions often rely on forced confession, or fail in court for other reasons. This demotivates police and damages their faith in procedural justice, encouraging them to consider summary options. Short-duration on-the-job training for Investigative Police Officers and others can be of value in addressing this. This skills upgrading can benefit from the involvement of international development partners.

- **Extend management-level police training and include scenario-based conflict management:** Existing models of community police training, focussed on divisional managers, and incorporating workplace exercises and professional qualification, are effective in teaching new means of crime and conflict prevention and should be sustained and extended. Practical, scenario-based conflict management training should be a part of the training of new managerial-level officers, and a component in promotion courses to managerial level for serving officers.

- **Prioritise intelligence gathering for conflict pre-emption:** Much of security policy in Nigeria is reactive, with interventions deployed when problems have already reached crisis point. Policing and security policy needs to move towards active and planned conflict pre-emption and prevention. To do this, good intelligence is essential. Where publics are reluctant to approach the police with information directly, they should be encouraged to do so through trusted interlocutors of standing in the community. Both community leaders and police need sensitising about the potential value of this linkage role, and development partners and domestic NGOs should support awareness-raising in this regard.

- **Continue to register vigilante groups:** Registration of vigilante groups and their members with police should be conducted in any remaining areas where it is not already done, and at the same time such vigilantes should be clearly instructed in their legal obligations and constraints.

- **Establish local oversight bodies:** Politicisation of vigilance groups can turn them into a force which exacerbates rather than reduces conflict. Therefore local oversight bodies such as stakeholder watch committees should be introduced and promoted, rather than having vigilante bodies exclusively accountable to political executives.

- **Make inclusiveness a central tenet of security task forces:** New security task forces in conflict-prone areas, such as Plateau State's Operation Rainbow, should be composed with prime consideration given to their inclusiveness and representativeness of all communities, both in personnel and accountability structures, and donors should support this process.

- **Promote rule of law:** Use of courts and procedure should be promoted for serious cases, over and above summary punishments and responses. Further research is needed to identify the factors – within the courts themselves, as well as with police, lawyers, and the general public – that currently discourage this.

- **Formalise feedback mechanisms:** Much of the feedback to which police are responsive is informal and flows via local social and political networks. At a formal level, there is a clear need to link medium-term policy and security planning to public perceptions of need via formal mechanisms, such as CLEEN foundation's criminal victimisation surveys.

[i.] In this paper, 'state' is used to refer to the system of government and constitutional public institutions as a whole; when referring to the individual units of the Nigerian Federation, the word State with a capital letter is used.

[ii.] Collier,P. and Hoeffler, A. Greed and grievance in civil wars, Oxford Economic Papers 56 (4), 2004.

[iii.] Regrettably, some members of committees see the appointment more as a matter of prestige than of supporting the police role.