

Partnership between the Police and the Community in Borno State, Nigeria: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

This paper examined the police in its partnership with the community. The method adopted was documentary, through which papers and relevant books were pulled together in order for this paper to have arrived at advisory position on how to improve the partnership between police and the community. This will go a long way in improving the image of police, and at the same time improve the confidence of the community towards the police.

INTRODUCTION

One important task necessary for the police to be successful in guaranteeing the security of life and property is to secure the support and understanding of individuals and communities. Police work is both a service to and for the community. But the experiences of the individual members of the public may diverge from this understanding and likely to affect the perception of the police as an institution. It is critical for police success that it is not perceived as a partisan institution that protects the rich and the powerful while antagonizing the poor and the weak. If this remains the public perception of the police as an organization then it would continue to encounter difficulties in its numerous tasks of enforcing law and order and ensuring the security of life and property. It is necessary for the police to evolve ways by which the members of the public would have confidence in its operations and activities, recognize its importance to achieve its goal of maintaining a secure, peaceful and orderly society. It is the contention in this paper that building understanding and partnership between the police and the community is a pro-active undertaking, more than a reactive response to situation important though this may be in given situations and circumstances.

The police in Borno State is part of the Nigeria (Federal) Police Force working under the centralized command of the Inspector-General of Police, with Police Commissioners heading State Commands. The state commands have divisions that make internal administrative decentralized control within the framework of the constitution possible. What this means is that the police is neither under the control of states or local governments, but exists as an autonomous organ cooperating with these governments along defined legal parameters. Note that the 1999 Constitution recognizes the existence of only one police force for the country. Thus working within this large national structure makes it possible for police personnel to be deployed to communities other than the ones that they are culturally familiar with. This, of course, gives the police personnel a wider cultural horizon and perspective of communities beyond the ones they were socialized into. But for advocates of state or local government police this is a problem in brokering understanding and partnership between the police and the community. The contention is that this is not healthy to respecting cultural sensitivities, diversities and identities.

Unfortunately, the Nigeria Police suffers from multiple public confidence crises even though there seems to be some measure of sympathy for the way the Nigerian authorities treat the force. A case in point was when some police personnel had to go on strike to press for the payment of their salaries and the support they got from the Nigerian public. But in spite of this the public does not seem to think that the police force exists to serve its interests even if that is what is provided for in the constitution about the role of the police. A definite recognition of the failure of the police to execute its security responsibilities effectively is the emergence of the vigilante groups in many communities. Of course it can also be argued that the vigilante compliments the effort of the police and that the police authorities allow the vigilante to exist is enough recognition of its own limitations. While it can be argued that no police organization can singularly provide security to the citizens of a country, it is also a fact that the attitude and character with which it is perceived can affect the extent to which it can get the support of communities and be successful in its task of policing. Thus, police-community relations are a challenge for both the police and communities in their drive to create and maintain a peaceful and secure environment (Alimika 1999).

Clarification of Terms

What is a community? The word community may have different meanings for different people and is likely to be considered narrowly in terms of homogeneity of a group and rurality. The tendency is also there to view it in traditional terms with defined set of values, norms and beliefs associated with religious and family life. Such communities may exist in the rural settings, but may not be the case in urban settings. Yet even in urban settings communities do exist. However, a community is not determined by size or scale. It is rather a common set of interests shared by people. In this context it can be said that wards can be considered communities in urban settings. It is important to bear the explanation of the anthropologist Frankenberg (1966) that: (in Coatman 1959). *All communities are societies, but not all societies are communities. Communities are peculiar in several ways..... A group of two or three hundred people living together on an urban housing estate may or may not from a community ... size is not the only key.*

Community implies having something in common. In the early use of the word it meant having goods in common. Those who live in a community have overriding economic interests which are the same or complimentary. They work together and also play together. Their common interesting in things gives them a common interest in each other. They quarrel with each other but are never indifferent to each other. They form a group of people who meet frequently face-to-face, although this may mean they end up back-to-back.

Thus communities exist in urban settings and can be delineated along occupational groups, housing location or concentration, or even ethnic dominance. There are can be community of civil servants, students, artisans or traders, Shuwa Arab, Chadian etc. this forms a complex of the urban society and challenges the police to maintain law and order while securing the understanding and support of these communities.

Understanding may not mean support or cooperation, but taken as a whole it means there is recognition and acceptance of the role of the police as an important institution for securing communities against threats to life and property and maintenance of law and order. But it must be worked for through engagements and offering explanations to the community for understanding to be achieved. It means engaging in acts of explanation of why and how the police engages in activities in communities. This would also mean that the police would not get opposition to its work even if it would not secure support for its actions. Such statement as “the police is only doing its work” is a demonstration of this understanding. The engagement with and in the community necessitates that the police discharge its responsibilities professionally without bias or partiality, a trusted institution that dispenses services without fear or favour.

Partnership means developing a cooperative and support frameworks towards assisting the police to make the community safe through individuals that constitute the community. This partnership is developed at several levels with traditional rulers, ward heads, community elders, youths and trade or commercial groups, associations or unions and related civil society organizations and the police. This is the quest behind the formation of the Police-Community Relations Committee (Adisa 1999).

Challenges to Building Understanding and Partnership

A critical element in building understanding, creating and sustaining partnership is the need to change perceptions. To the average Nigerian, the police is an organization that is ridden with corruption even if this is a pervasive national phenomenon undermining the effectiveness of many institutions. It is too easy to forget the many roles that the police play to make society safe, secure and orderly for the simple reason that it is unusual happenings that seem to attract attention and concern. The orderly control traffic, assisting school children to cross the road, keeping banks and offices secure, conducting night patrols, mounting roadblocks on the highways etc are considered normal and therefore deserving little attention including even the formation of the police-community relations committee. This is in the order of things. That the police is poorly paid and badly maintained is not an issue; that the personnel is overstretched is yet another diversion; that the police is poorly equipped is nothing unusual; that the personnel pay for its uniform is of no consequence; that it lacks logistic support by way of vehicles and communications gadget is in the order of things in Nigeria. It is only when our life or property is threatened and we ran to the police only to discover that there is no fuel in their rickety vehicle that we realize there is problem. That the police cannot solve our problem is an indication of how unserious the institution is. This is a problem but also a challenge begging for solutions.

While these are some of the problems inhibiting the police from realizing its objectives of crime control, peace and order, there is the related problem of interpersonal relations. The first basis for building understanding and securing partnership is the experience of individual contact with police personnel and treatment at the police stations. In present times some of the negative experiences that may make communities wary of cooperating with the police is the festering culture of extortion of motorists, in the bail process and illegal arrest of persons. The common belief is that once you have an encounter with the police some money can separate you. But this separation is not a product of legal enforcement but one of extortion. In summary we can raise the following questions as they are important in fostering understanding and building partnership between the police and the community (Chukwuma 2001).

- What is the police crime clear up rate in affected communities?
- What confidence does the low income Nigerian living in a community have in the Nigeria Police Force?
- What is the effect of police stop and search strategy on its reputation/standing in communities?
- What is the rate of police success in solving crimes involving ordinary people?

There is also the recognition that police personnel are poorly paid, the force underfunded and the condition of service unencouraging for reasonable and effective performance.

The tendency as experience seems to demonstrate is that the police is a reactive rather than a proactive organization. The existence of the Police Community Relations Community is meant to among other things, engender a quick and timely response to the security and order problems of communities and to assist the police to achieve effectiveness in the discharge of its responsibilities. For the police to succeed it must endeavour to practicalise the objectives underlining the formation of the Police-Community Relations Committee. (See appendix for the objectives of the PCRC) (Alimika 1993).

The Prospects for Building understanding and Partnership

The chances or prospects for building understanding and sustainable partnership between the police and the community are many, but would require the translation of the objectives of the PCRC into practical action. The police must understand and develop mechanisms for interaction with the civilian populace. This must be made part of the police training programme, recognizing and understanding interpersonal relations in the form of a Police Civilian Relations Course (Asemota 1993).

Community concerns about crime are very important in having successful relations. The police need to keep records of the concerns of communities and their specific crime and related security concerns. Most communities desire a secure environment, free from threats to their life and property and assured that the police operates in their best interest. It is logical to expect that for most communities street crimes will tend to occupy a higher concern than other forms of crimes that appear not to have victims. Such crimes as burglary, robbery, theft and murder are particularly important because they undermine the security of communities and the extent to which the police is successful in combating them would have implications for the type of relations between the community and the police (Alemika 1999).

It is important to note that when street crimes persist they tend to lower peoples estimation of the ability of the police to combat crime. Furthermore where communities were able to organize themselves in the form of vigilante groups apprehend criminal suspects and hand them over to the police, they would expect that the police authorities would prosecute such suspects and draw on the apprehenders and victims as witnesses. The actions of the community have implications: the vigilante appears to complement the efforts of the police, but at the same time is an indication of the inability of the police to guarantee citizens security in their communities.

The stronger a community is the less are the chances that street criminals would have the opportunity to succeed. It is therefore important to encourage communities to maintain close ties and enforce moral values among their children to make the work of the police easy. But communities can also ensure that they are also responsible for their own security as the formation of the vigilante groups illustrates. Variants of this exist in other places such as neighbourhood watch. Rude and rowdy behaviour on the streets must be discouraged so that this does not degenerate into further acts of breakdown of law and order. The success of the community itself depends on the control of crime. This requires responsible members of the community becoming important voices of social control of the behaviour of people in their communities. The police have a responsibility to stop communities from deteriorating into crime by clamping down on signs of undesirable behaviour.

Police engagement with communities is a necessary aspect of maintaining useful and credible relations. The organization of station tours for students, periodic community forums (ward by ward discussions, visitations, meetings); police career talk in schools etc. should be made a necessary component of the PCRC activities. The police should have occasion to reintroduce the Police Day celebrations that demonstrates to the public what the police do: demonstrations of the activities of the dog handling unit, the police cavalry called the mounted troop, the band section including providing simple tips to communities on how to secure their environments. Communities need to understand that the police is up to the task of providing order and guaranteeing public security.

Conclusion

Individuals and communities must understand that the effectiveness of the police depends on the cooperation it is getting. But more importantly, the police must operate and be seen to operate as an important professional organization ready to overcome its inadequacies and embrace new ideas for progressive and effective policing.

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