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Examining the Operationalization of Community Oriented Policing in Gulu, Uganda
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Policy Brief for “Police, Policing, and the Community: Community Policing in Theory and Practice in Gulu, Uganda” by Tyra Ashwini Bernadsha & Shai André Divon.

Executive Summary

In 2017, the Uganda Police Force (UPF) issued a new Community Oriented Policing (COP) strategy to create new partnerships between the police and the community. The aim of the strategy was to provide a framework for the operationalization of COP in the country. This research examined the operationalization of the UPF COP strategy in Gulu, Uganda as part of the preparations for transforming Gulu into a city. This brief will share the main findings of this research, which was conducted in Uganda between 2018 and 2019.

The Uganda Police Force (UPF) Strategy for Community Oriented Policing (COP) in Gulu

In January 2017, the Uganda Police Force (UPF) issued a new strategy for Community Policing as a comprehensive attempt to move the UPF towards embracing both the philosophy and practice of Community Oriented Policing (COP) in the entire country. The strategy is based on the assertion that weak state institutions in transitional democracies in Africa lead to enhanced and organized criminal activities that challenge the capacity of the police to address issues without engaging and partnering with local communities (UPF, 2017, p. 3). COP is thus flagged as the most prominent approach to partner with communities to assist the police in addressing the root causes of crime and insecurity.

The stated objectives of the UPF Strategy for COP are:

To enable the police to enhance and maintain its collaboration with the community, the public, community-based organizations, and other government departments.

Work with the community to support mediation programs to solve minor conflicts.

Encourage, enhance, and maintain the collaboration between the police and local residents for achieving public safety.

The objective of the study conducted in Uganda between 2018 and 2019 was to outline the application of COP in Gulu municipality in Uganda, focusing on the success and challenges as highlighted both by the police and various communities.

Community Policing in Gulu

According to the UPF Strategy, policing is viewed as a practice undertaken by the state through the UPF, and COP is flagged as a police initiative that aims at incorporating the active involvement of citizens in policing efforts. The UPF Strategy underlines COP as a transformational approach aiming at remodeling the state policing style from an ‘authoritarian top-down approach to a consensual community policing approach’ (UPF, 2017, p. 1).

The data collected for this study indicates that there are significant gaps in the levels of education, knowledge, and familiarity of COP among police officials in Gulu.

Some officers in the lower ranks, and especially on the post-levels, were not so familiar with the concept nor with the UPF 2017 Strategy for Community Policing. The senior command, on the other hand, knew the strategy well, and was familiar with the concept and its objectives. This allowed the UPF to carry out some activities and measures that were labelled as COP interventions, as discussed below. However, due to the lack of time and resources to engage in systematic planning to operationalize the Strategy for Community Policing, it was not yet being applied systematically in Gulu.

COP in Practice

Members of the community in Gulu view the police as an agent of the government and as outsiders to their community. There is a fundamental distrust of police officers as they are regarded as corrupt, sometimes violent, and unpredictable. Shifting this perception of the police as an agent of the government acting first and foremost to secure the interests of elites is difficult, especially when people frequently observe the role that the police fulfill on behalf of the government in subduing political dissidence and opposition. Yet, there are nuances in this view of the police by the community. Some community members recognize that not all police officers are alike – ‘some are genuine, and some are not professional and tarnish the name of the force.’ Many members of the community recognize that the police is underfunded and under-resourced, and acknowledge the difficulties police officers face in terms of performing their duties under these conditions.

At the bottom of adopting COP approaches lies the need to transform the police into an institution that

applies COP concepts to prevent crime and disorder by creating a partnership through cooperation with communities to identify contextual priorities and act as a public service. Following a series of failed implementations of COP, the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Uganda relaunched the program in 2008 by framing it as the core principle of policing in Uganda. As the core principle of UPF policing, COP was embedded into the command structure of the UPF from the regional to the post level. As a result, Community Liaison Officers were assigned to all districts and divisions, and nationwide neighborhood watch schemes were implemented. The police anticipated that the application of COP would enable them to rely on community resources to assist in fighting crime and improve police intelligence gathering.

The main objectives of COP presented by the senior command in Gulu included getting closer to the community, sensitizing people, getting people used to the presence of- and encouraging interaction with -the police, and being able to build trust with the community that would enable the police to access information about crime and criminal activities. To do so, the police leadership in Gulu flagged joint foot patrols with the community as one of the most significant manifestations of COP operationalization in Gulu. The study included participant observation by joining a joint police-community patrol. The patrol included random stops to interact with groups of men sitting on the street corners, stops at 'drinking joints' perceived by the police and some community members as localities where trouble potentially arises, and arresting youth who were suspected of crime. In addition to joint patrols, a number of other interventions were flagged by the police as COP

initiatives. One example of such initiative is Mayumba Kumi, a type of neighborhood watch where a group of households establish a security watch scheme based on their intimate knowledge of the neighborhood and the people who live and frequent it. Another COP intervention was the strengthening of police-NGO relations, which included building partnerships with the community, participation in neighborhood-based problem solving, embracing the ideal of community service, and security resources for the provision of better services to the community. Yet, one of the most prominent applications of COP in Gulu according to the police was the direct contact with the public through dissemination activities, where the police meets the public for interaction and information sharing.

When it comes to police community relations, members of the community flagged the use of 'crime preventers' recruited by the police from the community. While crime preventers were not mentioned by the police as a COP intervention, crime preventers interact with the community in certain contexts on behalf of the police and have an important negative impact on police-community relations. The crime preventers were perceived by community members as agents of the ruling party (the National Resistance Movement - NRM), acting violently and without impunity on behalf of the police.

While some of the measures by the UPF can be viewed and analyzed as COP interventions that address the objectives of the COP strategy to certain extents, it seems that none show significant success in improving the perception and image of the police with the public at large. There is no doubt that most police officers and

the senior police command in Gulu are aware of the COP strategy and its objectives. It is also clear that the UPF in Gulu has a consistent and sustained relationship, contact, and communication with community members in general, and local community leadership in particular. But while COP is acknowledged as the flagship strategy of the UPF, the senior police command in Gulu admitted that they have not made concrete plans to operationalize the 2017 Strategy in Gulu. This was explained both in terms of time and lack of resources to plan concrete measures for a wide-scale implementation of the strategy. Although there are some measures in place that the police consider to be COP interventions, these measures are not new and not a result of an attempt to implement the 2017 Strategy for community policing, nor were these measures implemented specifically as the operationalization of this strategy.

Lessons Learned

When examining the operationalization of the UPF Strategy for COP, it is evident that there are still fundamental gaps between the theory and practice of COP. It is also evident that while the discourse of COP is prominent among most police officers, there are significant hindering factors and structural handicaps that must be addressed if a Ugandan version of COP is to be implemented successfully, at least in Gulu.

Most of the interactions between the police and the community that are labeled as COP interventions today are rooted in historical practices, most established as forms of public control by the state for political purposes, intelligence gathering, and countering dissidence against the NRM regime. These

interventions are not viewed by the public (or the police) as innovative COP measures established based on an operationalization plan to apply the nation's strategy. As the data indicates, it seems that COP has achieved very little in Uganda due to its inability to shift the public perception of the police as an agent of the government. However, some of the issues that the police in Gulu faces today are the same problems that existed in the past, such as a lack of trust between the community and the police, the view of the police as a body that serves the interests of elites, lack of resources available to the police, poor training and education of police officers, poor salaries, and the use of arbitrary violence when dealing with the public etc. Combined, these lead to a public perception of the UPF as corrupt, violent, unpredictable, and untrustworthy.

On the other hand, some of the new communication channels established between the police and the public, especially those based on readily available communication technologies such as mobile phones, allow new forms of direct access to senior police command. It allows for personalized contact and access to the police and seems to lead to better communication, enhanced trust, and sometimes better police responses. Yet, it is unclear according to which criteria the police respond to direct appeals for interventions by local leadership or community members when it concerns crime and insecurity in Gulu.

It is practically difficult to achieve the COP objectives outlined in the strategy if the police, policing, and COP strategies are coupled with partisan politics, and measures recognized by the public from the past as actions to exercise control by the state to secure the

interests of elites. As long as the resources needed to establish effective, efficient, and nonpartisan COP are not invested in the UPF, there will be no prospects of creating a reliable and innovative service for the citizens of Uganda.

The most basic hindrance to the aspiration of COP as defined by the UPF is the basic mistrust that exists between citizens of Uganda and the UPF. This mistrust is anchored in the control the state exercises over security provision and the subsequent entrenched understanding by people that police interventions are not consistent, not reliable, and not concerned with the daily apprehensions of citizens. Under the conditions outlined in the article, it will be difficult to create a

meaningful partnership between the public and the UPF through COP.

References

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