

What Is Community Policing?: Divergent Agendas, Practices, and Experiences of Transforming the Police in Kenya

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Abstract In line with global trends, community policing has been a vehicle for transforming the state police in Kenya. This article analyses various community policing efforts in Kenya and argues that many of these initiatives have largely failed to act as a vehicle for transformation due to three interconnected problems of diversity, representation, and ownership. The first problem—diversity—relates to the multiplicity of definitions, manifestations, and practices of community policing, which creates uncertainty and provides space for various actors to engage with it in conflicting ways. The second problem—representation—concerns the identification and creation of the ‘community’: this remains to occur in a state-driven manner and is also not a straightforward concept or organizational unit, especially in a highly multi-ethnic and classed setting as Kenya. The third is ownership: community policing is not experienced or exercised as a partnership, but as a state-centric framework that should remain under the direction and ownership of the state police. We make our claim by focusing on Likoni, Mombasa and drawing from further qualitative data conducted by both authors in Kenya.

Introduction

One of the main objectives of police reform initiatives worldwide is to (re)establish confidence in the state police and create relationships of trust between police officers and citizens. To achieve this, community policing initiatives are regularly implemented across the globe. The Kenyan state has also used community policing (CP) as a vehicle to transform the state police towards ‘people-centred policing’ and numerous projects have been

undertaken throughout the past decades. On top of this, various non-governmental organizations have also implemented their own versions of community policing and citizens have also established diverse collective endeavours to provide security in and for their communities. As a result, we can currently identify an array of undertakings, both state and non-state driven, that operate under the label of ‘community policing’. Although we recognize the entanglements between these different

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undertakings, for the purpose of clarification, in this article, we use the (1) abbreviation CP to refer to the specific programmes implemented by the Kenyan state; the (2) term community policing, without capital letters, to refer to the idea and practice of community policing more broadly; and the (3) notion citizen-based initiative to refer to schemes set up by residents.

In this article, we argue that CP (and thus state-driven policies) has failed to enhance trust and engagement between the state police and citizens and therefore to act as a vehicle for police transformation. This is primarily due to three interconnected problems of diversity, representation, and ownership. The first problem—diversity—relates to the multiplicity of definitions, manifestations, and practices of community policing, which creates uncertainty and provides space for various actors to engage with it in conflicting ways. The second problem—representation—concerns the identification and creation of the ‘community’: this is not a straightforward concept or organizational unit, especially in a highly multi-ethnic and classed setting such as Kenya within which most forms of groupings are marked by suspicion and potential for violence. Furthermore, the process in which the ‘community’ and its representatives are selected is often state-driven and tends to uphold exclusionary practices. All this relates to the third problem: namely, a fundamental lack of community ownership. CP is not experienced as a partnership, but as a state-centric framework of extracting information from the community to keep policing under state ownership. Although we recognize that other issues, such as corruption and political manipulation also shape CP, we argue that these three issues (diversity, representation, and ownership) are most prominent and they are therefore the focus of this article. We use the case study of Likoni, a neighbourhood in Mombasa, Kenya, to flesh out the manifestation of these three issues.

In the first section of this article, we indicate the methodology used by both authors and thus the data on which our claims are made. In the section thereafter, we engage in a brief conceptual discussion of the concept of community policing in order to show the (global) variety of its manifestation. In the third and largest section, we focus on CP in Kenya and analyse the three interconnected problems of diversity, representation, and ownership by discussing both policy-based ideas of CP and zooming in on the case study of Likoni. We end this article with some concluding remarks on community policing in Kenya more broadly and its role in transforming the state police.

Researching policing and security in Kenya

In this article, we draw from qualitative data collected by both authors who work on different, yet complementary, research projects on policing and security in Nairobi. The first author’s research project focuses on the various mechanisms and actors that monitor police behaviour and occur within Kenya’s larger police reform trajectory. In addition to other qualitative methods, such as participant observation, the author conducted approximately 180 interviews with a wide range of research participants, such as police officers, human rights activists, lawyers, and civil society members. In addition, after formal permission was obtained from the Inspector General’s (IG) office, the author conducted a total of 75 formal interviews with police officers in Nairobi between June and August 2018 to gain their perspectives on reform and everyday policing.

As part of a wider research project on securing the local in rural and urban settings marked by violent extremism in Nigeria, Kenya, and Indonesia, the second author explored security assemblages from the vantage of non-state security groups and conducted ethnographic research for a

total of 7 months in different urban settlements in Nairobi and Mombasa.¹ She mapped 85 non-state security groups, including gangs, and conducted 67 interviews with a wide range of state and non-state security providers between January 2017 and August 2019.

Combined, the analyses made here are based on qualitative data collected through interviews (both open-ended and semi-structured) conducted by both authors with various actors, ranging from police officers to victims of police violence, and via personal observations made while attending and/or participating in gatherings during 2017–19 that were written down in extensive field notes. In this article, data collected from different projects is used to examine several dimensions on community policing that were identified by both authors in diverse settings.

Community policing

Community policing initiatives are often considered a key component in police reform trajectories (Oliver and Bartgis, 1998; Bayley, 2001; Brogden and Nijhar, 2005). Police reform is a broad concept that is used to refer to the various ways that police forces across the globe are ‘transforming’. Generally speaking, it refers to ‘far-reaching efforts to restructure and re-conceptualize policing and internal security within a society’ (C. Call, unpublished data). Most studies on police reform tend to focus on countries that have experienced some form of political transition, such as South Africa, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and Northern Ireland, to name but a few (M. Glebbeek, unpublished data; Brogden, 2005; Marks, 2005; Ellison, 2007; Krogstad, 2012). Within such studies, the emphasis lies with establishing police forces that engage in ‘democratic policing’, respect the rule of law, are transparent and accountable, and enjoy public legitimacy (Bayley, 2001; Hinton and

Newburn, 2009; Manning, 2010). In Kenya, and many other countries, such an envisioned shift is underscored by renaming the police force a ‘police service’.

Alongside renaming, and as such trying to re-focus policing from state- to people-centred, community policing initiatives are also widely considered crucial to foster a more democratic form of policing. The rationale behind organizing partnerships between police and citizens (recast as ‘communities’) not only considers such initiatives pivotal to enhance trust, but also to improve the exchange of information between citizens and police in the aid of fighting crime. Through its structural approach of diminishing social divides and bringing together the ‘community’ and the ‘state’, community policing acts as a vehicle for transformative justice (Gready and Robins, 2014). So what is community policing?

The first initiatives that were titled as community policing emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s in North America and Britain and were largely aimed at restoring police–minority relations in particular urban neighbourhoods (see also Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux, 1990; Skogan and Hartnett, 1997; Skogan, 2003; Tilley, 2003; Fielding, 2005; Friedman, 2013). These initiatives were concocted by police leaders and had the ultimate aim of gaining public confidence by engaging with the community through, for example, (re)introducing foot patrols and asking residents to identify the (crime) problems at hand.

Move forward a few decades later and we can identify community policing initiatives across the globe, whereby it acts as both a philosophy and concrete operational strategy. Although Friedman’s (2013, p. 292) definition stresses that community policing is ‘a policy and a strategy aimed at achieving more effective and efficient crime control, reduced fear of crime, improved quality of life, improved police services and police

¹ The Likoni case study was thus collected by the second author.

legitimacy, through a proactive reliance on community resources that seeks to change crime causing conditions' (2013, p. 292), he also recognizes that it is a nebulous term loosely used to refer to an assortment of things. In the literature, community policing is used to denote a range of policing styles, such as reassurance policing, intelligence-led policing, problem-oriented policing, and community-oriented policing (see [Tilley, 2003](#); [Skogan 2003](#)); to certain activities, such as conducting regular patrols and engaging in consultative meetings, or to specific organisational units, such as community policing forums (CPFs) that are managed by police stations ([Skogan and Harnett, 1997](#); [Makin and Marenen, 2017](#)). On other occasions, community policing is approached as a paradigm (see [Oliver and Bartgis, 1998](#)) to refer to a more proactive (rather than reactive) approach that involves long-term objectives, habitual engagement with community members, and embeddedness within larger organizational and cultural changes ([Skogan and Hartnett, 1997](#); [Brogden and Nijhar, 2005](#)). Due to these numerous usages and interpretations of community policing, it has developed into somewhat of a 'chameleon concept' ([Fielding, 2005](#), p. 460).

Research on community policing on the African continent tends to refer to community policing as initiatives that are state-led, while other initiatives driven by community members are labelled as forms of citizen-based security provision (see [Buur, 2006](#); [Baker, 2008](#); [Kyed, 2009, 2018](#); [Cross, 2014](#); [Di Nunzio, 2014](#); [Pendle, 2015](#); [Ruteere, 2017](#)). These studies are generally embedded in a pluralistic approach to policing, highlighting that policing has always been performed by a wide range of actors. And although some of these citizen-based security initiatives are established as alternatives due to failing, absent, or corrupt state police forces, in most cases, there are numerous overlaps and entanglements between these state and non-state policing actors ([Buur, 2006](#); [Diphooorn, 2016](#); [Kyed, 2018](#)). Studies on the

African continent thereby not only question where security actors are located on the state/non-state continuum and how these interact, overlap or contradict, but also, if and how these agents are supportive of particular government structures and regimes. It is thus difficult to compare community policing in Kenya with initiatives in the UK, for example. In fact, scholars such as [Brogden \(2004\)](#) and [Steinberg \(2011\)](#) highlight that community policing is very much an Anglo-Saxon concept that repeatedly fails to analyse phenomena under this moniker across the African continent.

Community policing thus means different things in various contexts, not only due to variances in policymaking and the design of the programmes, but also due to the larger social, cultural, and political environments in which they are implemented. There is not a 'one size fits all' model. Furthermore, in some parts of the world, community policing initiatives have been hailed a success, while in other parts, community policing has failed, or been seen as detrimental due to a wide range of reasons, such as not properly defining the community ([Rosenbaum, 1994](#); [Fielding, 2005](#); [Makin and Marenen, 2017](#)), not including certain individuals and groups ([Brogden, 2004](#)), and not fully incorporating local ideas and understandings when exporting community policing projects (see [Brogden, 2004, 2005](#); [Fielding, 2005](#); [Bayley, 2008](#)). In this article, we do not rely on a specific definition of community policing, precisely because we want to stress that in Kenya, community policing—as a concept and practice—is defined and experienced in numerous ways. Rather than focusing on uniformity, we want to accentuate the assortment of interpretations and in turn, the (problematic) consequences that this has.

Community policing in Kenya

According to [Ruteere and Pommerolle \(2003\)](#), community policing gained momentum in Kenya

in 1999, when the Vera Institute of Justice proposed to support two projects run by two civic organizations in Nairobi—the Kenya Human Rights Commission and the Nairobi Central Business District Association. The authors discuss how these initiatives did not achieve what they had set out to: they largely ‘fail[ed] to address or deliberately ignore[d] the wider political context’ (p. 602), and did not fully embrace the ‘meaning of democratization in policing matters’ (p. 603).

A few years later, community policing remerged under the beacon of police reform under the Mwai Kibaki government with the Economic Recovery and Wealth Creation Strategy (Ruteere, 2011). A specific programme—the Governance, Justice and Law and Order Sector Reform Programme—was established to transform the security and justice sector and a task force on reform was founded by the state police in 2004. A part of this was the formal launch of Community Policing (CP), yet a nation-wide strategy never really materialized.

This was probably due to the breakdown of police reform efforts that failed to decriminalize and depoliticize the state police (Akech, 2005; Hills, 2007).² This was tragically evident when the role of police officers in the widespread violence that occurred after the presidential elections in 2007–08 (and thus referred to as the post-election violence (PEV)) became known. A Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence was set up and from the 1,133 documented deaths, it was estimated that over 400 of these were the result of police actions.³ This report, and many others, reaffirmed the idea that substantial police reform was needed in order to create a democratic, accountable, and legitimate police force that served all citizens.

In 2009, the National Task Force on Police Reforms, chaired by Philip Ransley, made more

than 200 recommendations and most of these were then channelled into the new Constitution of 2010 and the National Police Service (NPS) Act of 2011. In addition to providing the legal framework for numerous changes, such as restructuring the command structures of the state police, the implementation of state-led Community Policing (CP) also fell under the NPS Act.⁴ Under Section 10(1)(k) of the NPS Act, community policing became constitutional: the IG is authorized to provide guidelines on CP to all police officers and ensure that there is co-operation between police officers and the communities in combating crime. Yet despite various efforts that were largely propelled by donor support, the nation-wide roll-out of CP did not happen until 2016.

In the meantime, other similar state-led initiatives were implemented. The first were local peace committees that were set up after the PEV of 2007–08 and operate under the National Steering Committee within the Ministry of Interior. These committees focus on peaceful conflict resolution and ‘bringing together traditional dispute resolution mechanisms involving traditional elders, women, religious leaders and non-governmental initiatives on the one hand and formal mechanisms for conflict resolution including those by government administrative and security agencies on the other’ (Republic of Kenya, 2011, p. 46, in Kioko, 2017, p. 5).

In 2013, largely impelled by the Westgate mall attack, the country-wide ‘Nyumba Kumi’ initiative was launched. Mainly imported from a Tanzanian experiment, the system brings security to the level of the ‘household’ by creating clusters of 10 houses (as the name implies in Kiswahili—‘nyumba’ [house] ‘kumi’ [ten]) that consist of local residents and stakeholders. The idea is that these clusters

² See Ruteere (2011) for a critique on this perspective of the state police as a force in service on its regime.

³ The Waki report can be accessed here: <http://www.nation.co.ke/blob/view/-/482958/data/46262/-/attnbm/-/CIPEV+Report.pdf> (accessed 17 December 2019).

⁴ The implementation of community policing was also a key recommendation in the Ransley report—see Skilling (2016).

meet regularly (twice a month), share information with each other, and, when needed, provide this information to relevant levels of the national administration. For many, it is seen as a form of local surveillance exercised by the state (Brankamp, 2020; Kioko, 2017). Initially, Nyumba Kumi operated through the colonial system of the provincial administration, that is, the chiefs and sub-chiefs. It thus acted as a parallel structure to the police, and many police officers shared feelings of resentment towards the scheme, as can be seen from the following quote from a high-ranking male police officer: ‘the aim of *Nyumba Kumi* was to snatch community policing from the police and bring it to the administration to make the chiefs more powerful’.⁵ Interestingly, Nyumba Kumi has only been enforced in some places and in urban centres; it largely exists in lower-income neighbourhoods and poor urban settlements that face high-terror-related incidents. Ultimately, Nyumba Kumi never really took off as was intended (see Otieno Andhoga and Mavole, 2017) and during interviews with police officers, it became apparent that many saw a need to ‘re-claim’ CP.

This reclaiming came forth with the launch of a new CP programme in August 2016. In May 2016, three key booklets were launched to give direction to police officers: (1) the Community Policing, Inspector General’s Guidelines to Police Officers; (2) The Handbook on Community Policing Forums and Committees; and (3) the Community Policing Information Booklet (National Police Service, 2016a, 2016b). Once handed out across the country, police officers would possess undeviating instructions on how to enforce CP as a way of ‘Building Safer Communities Together’. The new CP programme has the objective of bringing all community policing activities under one framework, including ‘Nyumba Kumi’. ‘Nyumba Kumi’ structures have thus been incorporated within the CP programme and are supposed to operate as

committees at the substation level (Muiyuro, 2018). Essentially, the CP guidelines outline the centrality of the police and the state.

Therefore, in a period of two decades, various state-driven CP initiatives have been implemented under the larger beacon of police reform. CP is seen as a pillar of democratic policing and key vehicle to enhance relationships between the state police and the community, to improve state legitimacy, and to essentially reduce crime and, more recently, combat terrorism. Yet, as we will show, the success of these CP initiatives has been very limited due to three main issues: diversity, representation, and ownership. In the subsections below, we will draw from our case study of Likoni, a semi-urban neighbourhood that is connected by a ferry to the island city centre of Mombasa, Kenya’s second largest city. In Likoni, there are three features of insecurity that have prompted particular security responses from both the residents and the police. Likoni is (1) a transit hub for drugs (such as heroin); (2) is widely considered a hotspot for Al Shabab recruiters; and (3) has experienced high levels of excessive (and often criminal) use of force by police. These three security features make Likoni a relevant setting where CP, as envisioned in policy, would meet the collective demands (by residents, activists, and government officials alike) for improving relationships of trust between police and citizens and ultimately, enhance security provision. Although the particular convergence of these features is specific to Likoni, these security challenges, especially in terms of what they pose to democratic and accountable policing, can be identified in various parts of Kenya. In the next subsections, we will zoom in on Likoni to portray the three above-mentioned problems that contribute to the particular complexities in which CP in Kenya is embroiled, namely diversity, representation, and ownership.

⁵ Interview: male police officer, February 2018.

Diversity: overlapping and conflicting initiatives

Likoni has had numerous community policing initiatives (co)existing throughout the past decades, either overlapping or contesting one another. In August 2018, Jamal, a former chair of various CP committees in Likoni since their onset in 2004, explained that community policing has always been a mix of state-initiated and citizen-based groups and practices. Before Jamal had become the chair of a CP committee, he had been a leader of *Sungu Sungu*. *Sungu Sungu* are named after similar groups in Tanzania (Abrahams, 1987; Heald, 2006) and refer to local citizen-based security groups of mostly young men who are selected and paid by neighbours and were prohibited in March 2002 (Anderson, 2002).⁶ When CP was installed as a formal policy, it tried to fill the gap of *Sungu Sungu*, yet it was unable to do so for a variety of reasons, such as a lack of public visibility.

In addition, Salim, a former village chairman (a Ward administrator who reported to the Chief), discussed the existence of Nyumba Kumi. He explained that it was first implemented in Likoni by a local NGOs in 2008 and therefore long before the national Nyumba Kumi initiative was rolled by the Kenyan government in 2013 (see Mkutu *et al.*, 2014).⁷ Salim had been responsible for coordinating this network in three Wards for several years and he described the earlier Nyumba Kumi as an initiative run by residents that collaborated with *Sungu Sungu*.

We need *Sungu Sungu* back in Likoni. It worked better than [the current] *Nyumba Kumi* and CP [forums]. We did not beat thieves, or kill them, no, instead we brought

them to the police. We worked together with the police, and killings were down [by police]. Nowadays, [police] killings are up, so high. And crime is up. CP, it can only work together with *Sungu Sungu*.

When rolled out by the state in 2013, Nyumba Kumi transformed from a citizen-based security initiative to a government one. Yet rather than working together with those involved in the existing initiative, Salim was ousted to make room for other residents with closer ties to the chief. Likewise, Jamal was asked to step down as chair of the CP committee, despite being chosen by the local CP members and representatives, to make way for someone with closer ties to the Likoni police command structure.

Jamal's claim that Nyumba Kumi and CP forums would be more effective hand-in-hand with *Sungu Sungu* was confirmed by a sheikh who is the Likoni member of the Mombasa Council of Elders. He shared that the first two increasingly functioned more as a public image and hardly contributed to productive relationships between the police and the community. His view was shared by many other residents. He took a pause before he continued to speak, as if deliberating whether he should share what was on his mind. 'But it is all for show. To show they do their work. There is another network of informers. ... I have seen *the list*' (emphasis added). He went on to describe how a befriended police officer had given him a list of 200 young men. Behind each name was also the name of the informer (many of whom were individual CP and Nyumba Kumi members) who had provided the information to the police. The sheikh's voice trembled: 'It was not the only list. I saw another one, in total there were 600

⁶ 'Sungu Sungu' groups came back in Ukunda, a town nearby (N. van Staple, personal observations in January and August 2018), but in Likoni because, as Salim opined, many police officers in Likoni were involved in the heroin trade and did not want to be exposed by local vigilantes.

⁷ Skilling (2016) also discusses a community policing project implemented in 2005 by the Crisis Response Development Foundation in three different parts of Kenya.

names of young men, ... and the police told me they are already implementing this list ... killing them one by one'.

The sheikh shared that he and other religious leaders from the council had indeed already noticed an upsurge in police killings in March 2018 following clashes between gangs, which had been the reason to talk to his police friend in the first place. He and his colleagues intervened instantly by arranging a meeting with the top commanders in Likoni. Meanwhile, he and others warned many of the young men on the list to go in hiding until the situation cooled down. 'The police said they have to implement this list, kill them all, to stop the gangs, to stop crime. We sent many to the rural areas, to be out of sight. We also sat down with the parents, and many of their friends. Even with the gangs that were fighting.' In the end, the religious leaders had potentially saved the young criminal suspects from being killed by the police, at least for the time being. The sheikh explained that the police had agreed to hold off for the meantime, but that they would not hesitate to pick up where they had left if the religious leaders failed in the long run.

Religious leaders and many residents shared that they preferred a non-violent intervention to protect the lives of the suspects while also preventing an escalation of tensions between gangs and police. Such spontaneous, yet informal partnerships between residents, community leaders, and the police demonstrate the lack of efficacy on the part of CP. Juma was one of the young men who had been on the list and he later shared why he thought the intervention by the religious leaders had worked: 'Police - they only know how to shoot. But the sheikh and the other leaders, they talked to us, helped us to escape and we listened. They also listened to us, and to our parents, and told police not to shoot us.' Hence, despite its mandate, CP had not been able to do what the religious leaders had achieved.

The case of 'the list' in Likoni also reveals that CP and Nyumba Kumi are not the only or even

the most prominent initiatives through which intelligence is gathered. Rather, the police also seem to work through shadow networks of informers outside the formal structures of CP and Nyumba Kumi, though inclusive of some of their members who doubled as informers. This demonstrates that police often opt to address security challenges outside CP and Nyumba Kumi—and also outside the law—which completely undermines the idea of CP. This supports the claim by the sheikh that CP and Nyumba Kumi are there 'for show'.

Above all, this case poignantly demonstrates the problem of diverse community policing initiatives with overlapping and conflicting compositions and objectives. As the Likoni case shows, CP programmes have often been implemented in settings that already had citizen-based initiatives. Yet rather than working from and with existing local initiatives, state-led programmes often replace the former and in turn, exacerbate the problems of trust between the majority of citizens and police. Furthermore, the various security initiatives are not necessarily autonomous groups. Rather, there are various degrees of overlap and this conjures uncertainty for citizens. Furthermore, the 'show' element, as described by the sheikh, is crucial here as it underlines the shared opinion of many residents that state-centred policing operates behind a 'façade of reform' (Osse, 2016). 'The list' is indicative of the predominance of policing practices that run against the premise of CP while also paying lip service to its policy ambitions. Accordingly, this lays bare how CP in Kenya tends to bolster state control, rather than transform the police into a democratic force held accountable by citizens. The state-centred nature of policing is further perpetuated by the selective and enforced modality in which 'community representatives' are selected by the police, as is discussed in the next section.

Representation: identifying the community

The problem of overlapping and conflicting community policing initiatives is further exacerbated

by how the ‘community’ is defined, identified, and thus created, bringing about particular forms of inclusion and/or exclusion. In the new CP programme of 2016, the community is defined in the CP booklet as ‘a group of people, living in the same geographical area or sharing the same attitudes, aspirations, and goals’ (National Police Service, 2016b: 1). In practice, police stations generally determine a community by administrative boundaries, such as wards and constituencies. These designated communities are then engaged by police stations through the logics of stakeholders, most of which are preset categories, such as youth, businessmen, and women, with some slots left to the discretion of an officer commanding station (OCS).

During an interview with an OCS in Nairobi in July 2018, when asking him how he identifies these stakeholders, he replied, ‘I see who the people are in charge and who I work with. The people that people respect and have a say, like religious leaders, but also the *boda boda* [motorcycle] guys—they are important too.’ When pressing further, it became evident that he was responsible for selecting the stakeholders—this was not done by residents. This process was echoed by other high-ranking officers. Therefore, the identification of what constitutes the community and who is eligible to represent it as stakeholders in CP is mostly achieved through a top-down selection process by police officers. This runs the risk of having participants that do not represent the community and exacerbates, rather than diminishes, existing social divides within a particular locality.

This problem of representation is clearly evident in Likoni. Here, as in other parts of Kenya, policing and relationships with the police reflect deeper social and economic differences that play out at the neighbourhood (or Ward) level. In Likoni, many residents experience a divide between people who define themselves as ‘natives’ of the South Coast (such as people with a Digo background) and people who are perceived and take themselves as ‘people from upcountry’ (and who

mostly self-identify as Kenyans and/or with their ethnic backgrounds). In the words of Ismael, an older male resident who identified himself as native: ‘People from upcountry, they come here and join their relatives, their own people in business. All these hotels they hire their own, not us. So no work, no business for us. What can we do? That is why our youth go to crime, drugs, even Al Shabab, no work, no life for us, but this is our land.’

Following such putative distinctions, most people with varying backgrounds agreed that residents from ‘upcountry’ worked closer together with police in providing information on suspects because, as Ismael put it, ‘we can’t tell on our own.’ ‘The list’ discussed in the previous subsection also provides some evidence for this: the names of the informers were considered to be names from ‘upcountry’ people. This does not mean that suspects only had ‘native backgrounds’, nor does it mean that all informers were people from ‘upcountry’, but it does show that they were popularly imagined as such. Such imagined distinctions between Likoni residents, pitting ‘native’ versus ‘upcountry’ residents, resonate with social divisions elsewhere in Kenya and are visible in the make-up of different security schemes. In Likoni, citizen-based security provision mostly consisted of neighbours who took themselves as ‘natives’, whereas police-controlled initiatives, such as CP, had a more mixed group of participants and were widely understood as less effective and prone to serve the interests of the state and ‘upcountry’ residents. The Likoni case thus shows that representation in CP initiatives cannot ignore contextualized social divisions. If left unaddressed, such divisions can undermine the overall aim of CP, as the experienced fault lines between ‘native’ and ‘upcountry’ residents in Likoni demonstrate.

Ownership: partnership or control?

The third issue, the lack of community ownership of CP, follows from the first two problems, i.e.

overlapping and conflicting community policing initiatives and selective and top-down selection of CP members. The fact that citizen-based security schemes are generally crushed by state-led CP and display all kinds of incongruities within manifestations of the latter diminishes the potential for a buy-in from citizens. The problem of ownership is further complicated by the state selection of community representatives. In contrast to its policy ambition, CP remains to be state-driven and does therefore not act or feel as a partnership between police and citizens.

In the new CP programme of 2016 ([National Police Service, 2016a: 8](#)), CP is defined as ‘an approach to policing that recognizes [the] voluntary participation of the local *community* in the maintenance of peace,’ (emphasis added) and consists of a ‘*partnership* between police and the community in [the] identification of issues of crime and general insecurity’ (emphasis added), whereby the police ‘need to be responsive to the communities and their needs, with its key elements being joint problem identification and problem solving while respecting the different responsibilities the police and the public have in crime prevention and the maintenance of order’. According to the instructions, CP can be established through the creation of two pivotal structures: the Community Policing Committees and the Community Policing Forums. The Committees act as elected governing entities that administer the activities and exist at all of the levels: county, sub-county, police station/ward, location, and sub-location. The forums refers to the meetings or gatherings of residents, ‘for the purpose of discussing their security and policing matters’ and these ‘should be inclusive and represent all the stakeholders of the area’ ([National Police Service, 2016a: 5](#)). Each police station/ward is responsible for deciding which activities should be undertaken and the following activities are suggested: ‘foot patrol, community meetings, door-to-door visits, public education programs, outputs-unit bases, neighbourhood

watch programs, neighbourhood town meetings, and mobile police stations’ (17).

Yet in reality, for many police officers, CP is about retrieving information from the community and about the community coming to them, rather than the other way around. Several police officers define it as any type of ‘public engagement’. Sometimes this solely entails speaking to citizens on the street, while for others, it is merely seen as a way of ‘being friendly’ to citizens. In addition, several officers do not see CP as a holistic strategy that all officers must employ or embody, but as a specific task that is carried out at precise moments or by designated specific officers with the title of ‘community policing officer’. There is thus not a uniform understanding of CP among police officers and this translates into their everyday operations.

The common understanding among police officers that CP is about gathering information from the public rests on a rather traditional Westphalian assumption that policing and crime prevention is the sole responsibility of the police. It is the state police that intervenes, monitors, and controls the situation, and residents are to act as abiding partners that provide assistance and intelligence. As is shown with the Likoni case, for many police officers, CP is something that they ‘own’ and ‘control’ and this is embedded within a larger perception that security is the responsibility of the national government. For example, according to the guidelines, the chairperson of the committee should be someone from the community, yet in many cases, it is the OCS, albeit informally. Although the CP guidelines stipulate a partnership, reality shows that state, rather than community, ownership is the norm.

Concluding remarks

In Kenya, community policing is widely perceived as one of the key drivers of police reform and proposed shift to democratic and ‘people-centred’ policing. This matches a rather global trend of

police reform initiatives that holds community policing as a key strategy towards establishing confidence in the state police and thereby creating some form of transformative justice. We argue that this fundamental goal has not been realized in Kenya⁸ and that this is due to three interlocking issues that hamper community policing efforts.

The first is diversity: although there are formal CP programmes implemented by the Kenya state, this occurs alongside other state initiatives, such as Nyumba Kumi, and other (pre)existing citizen-based security schemes. This creates uncertainty and ambiguity about what community policing actually is, thereby further maintaining the conceptual haziness that the term continues to conjure, as discussed at the beginning of this article. Practically, as illustrated by the Likoni case, this diversity allows police to implement CP in ways that serve the interest of a particular station, rather than the residents. Although the recent attempt by the NPS endeavours to provide a uniform, coherent, and all-encompassing programme for CP, it is too soon to assess which direction it will take and it will certainly take a while for the various initiatives to be streamlined.

The second is representation: the idea of what constitutes the 'community' is not a straightforward matter in a multi-ethnic and highly classed society as Kenya. In Likoni, we can see that leaving social divisions unaddressed leads to tensions that can be exploited by police officers, as was the case with the shadow network of 'non-native' informers that provided the intelligence for 'the list'. Furthermore, the entire process of delineating the community remains to be state-driven and is often not done in consultation with local residents. All of this connects to the third issue of ownership: CP is framed as a partnership, yet it remains to be seen as a mechanism whereby the police can extract information and assert control within a state-centric narrative and framework.

⁸ In a recent article on Kakuma refugee camp, Brankamp (2020) also questions the role that community policing efforts have played in enhancing democratic participation.

By focusing on CP in Likoni, we have illustrated the devastating consequences if: (1) state-led programmes, such as CP, do not work alongside other initiatives, both state and citizen-driven (i.e. Issue 1: diversity); (2) leave local divisions and tensions unaddressed to exploit these for intelligence-based purposes (i.e. Issue 2: representation); and (3) regard CP as a form of extraction and a network of informers, rather than as a partnership to proactively provide security (i.e. Issue 3: ownership). The example of the list points to the crucial role that initiatives such as CP are complexly implicated in the tragic problem of extra-judicial killings that plagues many parts of Kenya (van Staple, 2016).

We contend that as long as these three issues of diversity, representation, and ownership remain, CP efforts will fail to achieve the desired objective of people-centred policing. This is especially considering the crucial role that other dimensions not discussed here, such as corruption, also play. Furthermore, we have centred our analysis on one case, namely Likoni, but we have also identified similar trends in other parts of the country, especially Nairobi. We therefore welcome and encourage the philosophy behind community policing, yet we are sceptical of the role that CP plays in its current configuration and contend that the three key issues of diversity, representation, and ownership need to be addressed in order for transformative police reform efforts in Kenya to fully flourish.

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