



Fifteen years of police reform in Sierra Leone

COMMUNITY POLICING AND LOCAL POLICING PARTNERSHIP BOARDS

‘Local Needs Policing’ is the hallmark of the Sierra Leone Police community policing model. This DIIS Policy Brief lays out ten key observations that may be helpful when police reform is established elsewhere in the Global South.

When the war in Sierra Leone ended in 2002, police transformation became the policy to establish a functioning central government in Freetown. A significant part of this process has been the institutionalization of community policing by the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), who established Local Policing Partnership Boards (LPPBs) to ensure stakeholder participation in policing. When the LPPBs were first established, they signified a perceived need

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that the chosen community policing model has an inclusive rather than an exclusive effect on who decides what local security means and how it is enforced.
- Understand local structures of authority and distribution of power well before embarking on community policing reform.
- Realize that individuals engaging in community policing are motivated by personal interests which go beyond the desire to support local security.
- Accept that in some countries the time is not right for introducing community policing.

LPPBs are built around already existing structures of authority

“Before, the police would only work through and with the chiefs. Now they work with the communities. You will see people going directly to the police if they need to. The partnership boards have contributed to this transformation”

LPPB member, eastern Sierra Leone

within the police and among international partners to rebuild relations with local communities across Sierra Leone following the fundamental bureaucratic collapse the country experienced during the 1990s.

According to the SLP's 2010-2011 Strategic Plan, LPPBs are “an initiative to engage communities to fight crime and the fear of crime in cooperation with the police (...) The LPPB forms part of the community policing strategy aimed at involving non-police stakeholders in security and crime prevention”. LPPBs are thus seen as a bridge between the police and communities. According to the LPPB guidelines issued by the police leadership in 2011, they are expected to “investigate and resolve conflict between members of the community” and “increase the level of interaction between the police and the local communities”. This point was reiterated in the SLP's 2012-2014 Strategic Plan as an “increasing need for the involvement of citizens in policing through LPPBs.”

What can we learn from how the concept of LPPBs has been operationalized in Sierra Leone? This DIIS Policy Brief outlines ten lessons, based on data collected during 2012–2013 in 17 of Sierra Leone's 33 police divisions among LPPB members, police officers and users/beneficiaries.

1. LPPBs democratize security

They include the citizenry in defining and acting on local security concerns to a degree that was not the case before and during Sierra Leone's 1991–2002 conflict. They have engendered a shift of focus from police collaboration with local authorities to collaboration with communities in the broader sense. Rather than working only with traditional leaders such as paramount and lesser chiefs, the SLP, particularly in urban centers, involve a cross-section of society,

including women and youth representatives, bike riders (transport), teachers, small traders, businesspeople and farmers.

2. LPPBs are a nationally and locally driven initiative

While LPPBs incorporate international best practices, they were first and foremost initiated and supported by the national police force. Voluntary in nature, LPPBs function without much (if any) outside direct financial support, and have proven to be sustainable, because SLP and community members alike consider them important for local safety and security. In a resource-scarce environment such as Sierra Leone, the fact that they are able to function on a voluntary basis and with a limited resource base is worth noting.

3. LPPBs support a police force that is logistically challenged

They provide information and report crimes to the police, mediate minor disputes within local communities and between the community and the police. While there are problems related to untrained civilians playing this role, it is also the case that the SLP does not have the necessary capacity or local access/legitimacy to maintain a presence in many rural as well as urban areas.

4. LPPB members are interest-driven, but not politically motivated (at least not openly)

Generally speaking, when LPPB members are openly political, they are excluded from participating in community policing activities. Many LPPB members, particularly those members who represent the business community, argue that they seek LPPB involvement to secure the area in which they live and work, and this includes their commercial interests. This is to say that precisely because of the scarcity of resources that characterizes Sierra Leone, it should be

expected that civilians will seek to join LPPBs in order to protect and enhance their own interests.

5. LPPBs demonstrate a blurred line between civil and criminal cases

LPPB members generally believe that serious cases such as assault (with intent) that causes injury, theft and sexual abuse are “above” them, i.e. beyond their voluntary, lay capacity as LPPB members. Such cases are referred directly to the SLP. However, a grey area exists, particularly with respect to domestic violence. LPPBs, along with traditional leaders and even the police, perform informal conflict resolution. Most LPPB members deal with “fraudulent conversion”, “common assault”, and “matters between husband and wife”. Precisely what these cases entail, and whether violence and theft are involved that would make them criminal acts and thus police matters, is not always evident.

6. LPPBs institutionalize the women’s role in local security

Women’s leaders are considered part of the inner circle of LPPBs and often assume leading positions. It is generally accepted that they play a unique role in matters of local security, notably with respect to women and children involved in domestic cases of

violence and sexual abuse. Domestic violence is widespread in Sierra Leone: women as LPPB members are able to represent the voice and interests of women in a way that men often are not. Women who are actively involved in LPPBs have fostered the institutionalization of easy/formalized access of women to the police.

7. LPPBs merge with already existing structures of authority at the local level

This means that ultimately, there is limited clarity on whether cases are handled by an individual in his or her capacity as LPPB member, or as a consequence of his or her standing in the local community. Chiefs, quasi-vigilante groups and secret societies play a central role in enforcing order and security at the local level, and LPPB members are drawn from all of these groups. Paramount chiefs are formally involved in LPPBs in an advisory capacity and are a fact of political life in rural Sierra Leone. It is therefore inevitable that they will have a say in how security should be delivered in their chiefdoms. Similarly, groups of young men now play an important role in securing order vis-à-vis LPPBs in rural and urban areas alike. This is a security function that young men have long played in Sierra Leone, often under the guidance of the local leadership (traditional leaders).



LPPB member in Peyima, Kono district, eastern Sierra Leone © Aubrey Wade

LPPB AND INFORMAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN KENEMA

The Chairman of the Bike Riders Union in Kenema had lent a motorbike to a rider. The rider decided to drive through the Hamaddiya Muslim Secondary School compound and by accident hit a female student. One teacher and a few students witnessed the accident, apprehended the rider and beat him up. The rider managed to escape and sought refuge in the house of one of his friends. The group of students that had beaten him began to stone the house in which he was hiding. They demanded that the rider should leave the house of his friend, but he refused. The students then forced their way into the house and one of the students stabbed and killed the rider.

Immediately after the incident, the bike riders threatened to burn down the Hamaddiya Muslim Secondary

School and kill any student seen in the street. A meeting was called by the Resident Minister (Eastern Province), involving the family of the deceased, the bike riders, the principal of Hamaddiya Muslim Secondary School and LPPB members. The matter was discussed, and it was agreed that all parties should refrain from using violence.

The LPPB members were actively involved in monitoring developments after the event and provided the SLP with information on the bike riders' plans. After a week had passed, LPPB members, members of the Bike Riders Union and the principal of the Hamadiyya Muslim Secondary School successfully undertook a joint sensitization tour around Kenema, in which students were called upon to return to school after a week with no classes.

8. LPPBs should not be codified by legislation prematurely

The role of the LPPBs is not defined by law; indeed, no police legislation has been developed since the LPPBs were established in 2002–2003. Instead, to date, LPPBs have been developed and implemented at the operational level, and have become one of the critical ways to implement and consolidate Local Needs Policing. Because LPPBs are still evolving as a concept and a set of practices, they therefore continue to be characterized by a number of ambiguities. It is essential that the LPPBs are not formalized by legislation prematurely, but are given time to develop and be tested in practice.

9. LPPBs resolve cases between the police and the public

This role of liaison is vital, especially in cases when the police are accused of mishandling a citizen. These are particularly delicate cases because they have the potential to lead to general unrest. In one instance in Kailahun, a district in eastern Sierra Leone, LPPB

members went on the radio to speak about a current issue of police abuse of a civilian, and arbitrated between the parties involved. As a respected elder, the LPPB chairman led the process, and a compromise was reached. Similarly, the Bike Riders Union in Bo, which handles most transportation in the second largest town in Sierra Leone, see LPPB members as "middlemen" between the community and the police.

10. LPPBs may change the image of the police

If LPPBs continue to be seen as community-driven, they may support an ongoing change of the SLP's image. The LPPBs have encouraged a degree of transparency/openness and, not least, accountability within the SLP. While LPPBs do not pay allegiance to the police, they are able to some degree to hold them to account for their actions.

For more information see Peter Albrecht, Olushegu Garber, Ade Gibson and Sophy Thomas, 'Community Policing in Sierra Leone – Local Policing Partnership Boards', DIIS Report 2014:16, Copenhagen, 2014.

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Cover photo: Sierra Leonean police officers on duty © Aubrey Wade

