Bridging the Gap: Developing Community Policing and Engagement in Challenging Environments

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a practitioner's view on delivering community policing in challenging environments. The author draws upon his direct experience of advising on, implementing and training in this area from countries such as Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Jordan, Somaliland and most recently, the Syrian Arab Republic. Where appropriate, literature on the subject is referred to in an attempt to bridge any perceived 'disconnect' between the theory and practice. Some of the common barriers to effective implementation are discussed together with factors such as securing advance 'buy-in' at senior levels, setting policy, strategy, selection, recruitment and training. The importance of deciding in advance which level of engagement the police are currently operating at, and which level they will agree to aspire to, is examined before drawing conclusions on the considerations for implementing community policing and engagement programmes in challenging environments.

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Introduction

The area of community policing has always been considered somewhat of a 'safe bet' in policing circles. In comparison to other aspects of policing such as public order, homicide, drugs squad, covert operations etc. it is traditionally seen as low risk but with a possibility of yielding high returns. Many International Police Assistance Programmes (PAPs) include this element of policing and are, more often than not, carried out in regions which possess some common characteristics. They are emerging democracies or have come through, or are still going through, a violent period of transition and change, or indeed both.

By its nature, undertaking a PAP more often than not, will involve major restructuring and the introduction of change to the police. The immenseness of this task should not be underestimated and such processes can take decades. The author, being a native of Northern Ireland, served as a police officer from 1982 to 2010 with the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which itself was dramatically transformed into the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in 2000 as part of the 1998 Peace Agreement (The Good Friday Agreement). One hundred and seventy-five separate recommendations were made by the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland (*A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland*, 1999). The transformation was from a mostly reactive anti-terrorist and paramilitary style of police 'force' to a more proactive and responsive police 'service'. This is characterised by inclusiveness, being community oriented, acceptable to all sides in Northern Ireland and representative of the community it serves. It was and still is, a difficult, emotional and sometimes painful experience for all concerned. Although immense progress has been made over the past decade, there still remains a threat to peace from dissident terrorist groups in the Province.

He also observed similarities and drew certain parallels, between the emerging policing environment in Northern Ireland and that during his time with the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) police from 1999 to 2000 and the ongoing transformation in policing in Kyrgyzstan, working with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The mantra of community policing is often espoused as best practice and subsequently many donors scramble to introduce this concept to such regions as mentioned. However, it is not a panacea for all ills and many contemporary community policing models are specific to certain countries. It makes 'off the shelf' packages somewhat difficult to transfer between regions. This is not, however, for the lack of trying on the part of some organisations and 'experts' in this field.

The author has witnessed the results of attempts at introducing community and neighbourhood policing programmes from one country to another without any regard for context setting or most basic of Learning Needs Assessment and community consultation being carried out beforehand. Adopting a 'one-shoe-fits-all' approach can result in bewildered audiences, missed opportunities, wasted funding and criticism from the 'recipients' of the organisations and the 'experts' involved. Without proper context setting, well established methods and procedures from one country can fail spectacularly in another. If attention is paid however, to proper context setting and prior consultation then, despite differences in culture, customs, language, traditions, religion and so forth, the author argues that fundamental aspects of community policing can remain a constant, such as using joint problem solving models, identifying and working with partners, confidence, trust and capacity building and so on.

There remains however, some skepticism, often by senior and more 'seasoned' police officers involved in any transition process. Even though communities themselves may be desperate for police reform and an accountable police service, which community policing is a part of, they can sometimes be denied this by a reticent police hierarchy who fail to embrace and are fearful of, change.

This can be one of the many inhibitors to the successful introduction of community policing and engagement. Proper context setting, explanation and assistance with a practical 'How to do it' approach being central, not just the 'What it is' theory.

Unfortunately, the "What it is' aspect is relatively simple to deliver and favoured over the 'How to do it' by many consultants. The latter appears to them to be simply too difficult as it demands commitment, time, understanding, creativity and innovation. This cannot be learned or recited from books, as the 'What it is' element can, nor from the vast amounts of standard community policing packages (off the shelf) widely available.

The image of consultants arriving in country, delivering an off the shelf community police training package, totally unsuited to the region, receiving payment and leaving is often the subject of humour in that 'they ask for your watch then tell you the wrong time'!

Donor organisations have a role to play in this and should ensure that contracts reflect the need for contextualisation, needs assessments, leading to design of bespoke training with on the ground follow up coaching and mentoring as well as strategic and operational considerations. Although this professional (and ethical) approach gives the best chances of sustainability, domestic ownership and exit strategies, it is, for a variety of reasons, not always practiced as a 'tick box' mentality and lack of evaluation process sometimes prevails.

What is it?

There often exists confusion as to what exactly community policing is. The term 'community policing' implies an element of control exercised by the police over a community or communities. The PSNI for example, prefer to use the term 'policing with the community' implying a partnership approach, which this style of policing demands. The play on words and number of terms used is however, unhelpful and confuses not only the public, but also many police officers themselves who struggle with the plethora of definitions and terminology. Neighbourhood policing, community policing, community-oriented policing, neighbourhood management, citizen focus, problem-oriented policing, community safety, community engagement, sector policing, the list is seemingly endless. Trying to define 'community policing' has been likened to trying to hold mercury in your hand (Lab & Das, 2003.) In fact, it may be simpler to identify what community and neighbourhood policing is not, rather than what it is.

The author will steer well clear of attempting to devise yet another definition, or term, for this style of policing. Perhaps it is best left to the simple 'community policing' title, as both communities and police seem to understand what this means in terms of police and communities working in partnership in problem solving and improving quality of life in a particular locality.

There is perhaps one common underlying theme with this style of policing; there must be a genuine willingness of both police and community to work together. The motives of the police and communities for doing so, however, can vary considerably. From 'neighbourhood watch' type scenarios, where cooperation and collaboration are almost a 'given', to the much more demanding 'holding to account'. In the latter, police community relations take on a more formal role, become less 'cozy', more strained and uncomfortable. Police accountability has become more prevalent in recent years as citizens become less trusting of the 'state' and where openness and transparency are both demanded and expected. This latter aspect poses particular challenges when attempting to introduce community policing in the more 'challenging environments'.

Community policing schemes, however, can sometimes be seen as being implemented in 'safe areas' both in terms of low crime and a high acceptance of the police (Bayley & Shearing, 1996; Topping 2012). This may be one reason why they can become so 'attractive' to donors and police organisations, particularly when it comes to measuring increased confidence levels, which may have been very low to begin with. There is no difficulty in conducting pilot programmes in 'safe' areas when introducing the concept however, in order to evaluate and improve, before addressing the issues in more 'challenging' localities. This can avoid the perception that community policing is only being introduced in areas where it is needed the least.

Community policing methods can also vary considerably across a region, city, town or even neighbourhood. Again, there is no 'one shoe fits all' approach. As part of the training programme devised for Kyrgyzstan and Jordan the author includes material on both Broken Windows and Signal Crime to demonstrate that people living in different areas hold different values and therefore their resilience levels and acceptability, or otherwise, of 'crime' varies considerably and so must police responses.

The Challenges

On the face of it community policing seems a relatively simple process to introduce. There exists, however, some confusion between police-community relations and community policing (Trojanowicz, 1972). In some areas, this misunderstanding can result in police inadvertently raising community expectations of what they [police] can deliver. The police then find themselves in a position whereby they cannot deliver the service expected by the community. This leads to a fall in trust and confidence levels and ultimately the whole exercise may result in relations with communities being made worse than they were before the introduction of the programme.

It is essential that, just as with introducing any other method of policing, thought is given to the community engagement process and at what level the police plan to begin with and what is the highest level they will aspire to. The International Association for Public Participation have produced a 'Public Participation Spectrum', with the lowest level being information and increasing through consultation, involvement, collaboration and finally empowerment being the highest level (iAP2.org). Thought is seldom given to this aspect, which should be agreed at senior command to ensure that there is a corporate approach and no misunderstanding at operational/lower rank level. To this end, draft policy and strategy should be devised in advance of, or in tandem with, the introduction of a community policing model. This may seem logical but it is surprising how often, when community policing is being introduced, there is a failure to secure 'buy-in' at senior level resulting in a vacuum being created as regard the development of a robust policy and strategy document. This can often result in an ad-hoc approach with different police areas doing their 'own thing'. In the end the omission only results in community confusion, strained relationships, broken promises and mistrust. The 'skeptics' are then in a position to dismiss the concept as 'unworkable'.

An easy Option?

Police organizations sometimes assume that they are 'experts' in dealing with the public. After all, what do communities know about policing? They [police] also tend to have an obsession with rigid command structures gathering statistics,

centralization, and generating policy from these. This can result in inappropriate policing for particular areas. For example, centrally collected statistics show an increase in house burglaries generally, central policy makers generate a blanket response of increased emphasis on detection of burglaries for all areas. Local commanders are then faced with demonstrating, through statistics, how they are implementing this policy and meeting targets (or not as the case may be). League tables, if used, add additional pressure as different police areas are then compared at headquarters. On the face of it this may appear reasonable as a performance measurement tool.

However, not all police districts experience the same problems. For some communities, what this can mean is that the problems they are experiencing, for example anti-social behaviour, receive less attention, as this will not contribute to the 'burglary statistics'. This can alienate communities and lead to a fall in confidence and trust levels in policing. The author has attended community meetings where police proudly announced their local strategy for the area only to be lambasted by an angry audience as it did not deal with the local concerns as regards feeling safe and secure.

The idea of 'if it cannot be measured it doesn't get done' is an example of policing by numbers to centrally set targets. Community policing by its very nature is difficult, although not impossible, to 'measure'. A traffic officer can produce evidence of speeding detections, a detective how many cases are being dealt with, and so on. A community police officer deals with confidence building, trust, respect, relationship building, highly visible, easily accessible and so on. These are not normally included in 'performance measurement tables' as they are not specific to an individual officer's 'outputs'.

Another less obvious reason these criteria do not feature often in policing circles however, might be that in order to measure them, the community must be surveyed. Once again police will have no control over the outcome which is, as discussed, something which will concern many senior officers. They can easily get caught up in the 'What if the community say ....', instead of seeing this as a means to improve service delivery and ultimately their officer's performance. No one likes to be told they are doing a 'bad job' but as public servants the police should be open to

constructive criticism at times and see this as not a threat but an opportunity to improve.

A specific set of performance indicators is required for community police officers, which requires some lateral thinking at times. This is often at odds with the very factual 'black or white' way police are trained to operate. A balance must be struck between performance measurement, value for money and local needs and priorities. In the UK over the past decade, there has been a gradual shift from government setting all targets through the Home Office (Ministry of Interior - MOI) to a more hybrid approach whereby a smaller number of overall targets are set at this level, but local commanders are then free to set targets based upon the problems specific to their area.

This not only satisfies government but also the local communities, who no longer see inappropriate targets being applied to their neighbourhoods. It is a 'win-win' as government can hold the police to account whilst at the same time enjoying support from communities who see police dealing with local issues. The police spend less time having to explain to communities, in some districts, why they are concentrating on matters of low or no concern to the residents of those areas. This is a move away from centralization and may not sit comfortably with some police organizations or MoI. In one particular region in which the author worked, it was alleged that police simply stopped recording a particular crime if they were exceeding centrally set targets or were in danger of exceeding last year's figures. As there was no openness, transparency nor accountability, there was no challenge to this practice with the result that year on year that specific crime figures remained the same or showed a small decrease. Taken to its logical conclusion, this would eventually result in a zero or ridiculously low figure.

Decentralization is key to this area of police work and can take time to embed as organizations struggle with the concept and the prospect, of releasing more control to local police commanders. The whole idea of actually consulting communities on what they see as the main problems for policing can be daunting. The danger, as senior officers sometimes see it, is that with 'consulting', once the process is started then community expectations are raised and this requires careful managing. In other words, if you ask, then you must act on what you are told or else be in a position to defend and explain, why you cannot address certain issues.

Many police organizations emerging from conflict or totalitarian regimes, do not 'do' transparency very well. They do not understand 'why', which is understandable given the history of many of the regions where police assistance programmes are introduced. As a consequence, they struggle with the concept of community policing and engagement. Likewise, the prospect of being held accountable does not sit well with some senior commanders, again this is central to any community policing programme being successfully introduced.

It would be somewhat naïve to suggest that accountability, openness and transparency should be in place from day one. As a new concept, it requires careful choreographing with information, coaching, training, advising and assistance being provided to police at all levels. Also, communities must be informed of changes, as this is an essential part of managing expectations. It requires a gradual step-by-step introduction.

Many officers whom the author has trained and assisted in this area, are often bemused by such things as the UK Freedom of Information Act. This legislation is specifically aimed at state bodies, such as the police, and makes it compulsory for them to disclose information and figures, within a specified time upon written request. There are of course exceptions, but these must fall under specific headings and are open to challenge through the courts. This ensures that the system is not abused by systematic refusals and acts as a check and balance.

To simply announce the introduction of community policing without informing communities what it is and what it is not, can cause more problems than it might solve at an early stage. A well thought out communication and information strategy prior to any operational implementation will help bring communities onboard. They [communities] may then understand when and why, things don't work as they expected and therefore their expectations have been managed. This was the process followed in Jordan at Zaatari Refugee camp, which houses around 75,000 Syrian refugees and is, in effect, a small city. Initially the refugees were wary of police, as their prior experiences were 'not all good'. A careful process had to be followed beginning with short informal meeting with 'elders' from the camp and working on relationship building.

One of the questions the author asked was 'what did they [refugees] expect from police?' They commented that they had never been asked anything like this before and were somewhat bemused as to why. One of the fundamentals they came up with was respect, this came well before catching criminals and is included in the abstract to this paper as the second of Sir Robert Peel's nine principles.

These findings were incorporated into the community police officers course for the camp to assist the police understand the community they were to provide a service to. This exercise was time well spent and has been proven to be effective and the correct approach in staring to build confidence in a community which has been through very difficult and traumatic experiences.

Policy, Strategy, Selection and Training

Buy-in and support at senior police and ministerial level is a pre-requisite to the successful introduction of any community policing programme. This cannot be underestimated. Without the necessary groundwork and context setting being carried out beforehand, the task of introducing and maintaining such programmes, whilst not impossible, is extremely difficult. The challenge here is that senior police and ministry officials, tend to stick to what is known and what they consider 'safe'. To be associated with something new (change), which is entering uncharted waters, can be seen as a high risk to their career. No one wants to be associated with failure; its only human nature and this may prove a huge obstacle as the 'let's wait and see' mentality prevails.

This is where careful planning is important. Donors and experts must take account of this potential 'obstacle' and plan for how they will address it. Of course, as soon as any success becomes evident and communities begin to 'like' the new community police programme, securing buy-in from senior officers (and politicians) becomes much easier as they begin to see benefits, not necessarily for the communities but for their own careers. Whilst this may be seen as doing the 'right thing for the wrong reasons', it still can achieve the desired result.

Having secured buy-in, of whatever degree, work should commence on a draft policy and strategy. This will go hand in hand with a communications strategy, human resources, selection and training as well as operational orders and protocols for information sharing. All of these concepts may well be alien to the beneficiary.

Community police officers are sometimes seen as the poor relation in policing circles with minimal investment in training, equipment and little thought given to their role. When one considers that these officers are the 'very public' face of the police and whom most citizens come into to contact with, it is important that they are carefully selected and receive adequate training and support. The image and public perception of the whole police organization can rest on their shoulders.

In most police organizations, there exists, outside of rank, a 'hierarchy' of roles. Detectives, Special Branch, Drugs squad, Homicide and such like, even though officers may be of equal 'rank in uniformed roles, the above are often held in esteem and their roles aspired to. Uniform front line policing is often seen as being at the lowest level and many officers spend all their time trying to escape from this to one of the 'specialisms'. These 'higher' roles often attract financial allowances and provide better working conditions and specialist training. There is little therefore, to attract officers to uniform community policing.

In what has been referred to as a 'blue- print for democratic policing anywhere in the world' (Ellison, 2007, p. 243), the 1999 findings of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland (ICPNI), as related to neighbourhood and community policing, identify this as a core area of police work.

This is also reflected in the 2012 Winsor Report (UK) into police pay and conditions in England and Wales. Winsor lists four core-policing areas, of which neighbourhood policing is one and recommends that community officers receive equal allowances to the other 'three core areas' (Investigations, Public Order and Special Operations).

The police actually 'solve' very little crime on their own (detections), rather they rely on information from communities and other sources. However, this does not generally appear in 'Cop Movies' or TV series as it's seen as 'boring' and not 'exciting or sexy'. It has been referred to as 'touchy-feely' (Grabosky, 2009), not conforming to the 'John Wayne' image and not 'real police work' (Herbert, 2009).

One of the 'Boston bombers', in the United States in 2013, was only apprehended because a concerned citizen telephoned his local police to report that there was a suspicious person hiding in his back garden. The millions of dollars worth of intelligence and surveillance equipment and law enforcement resources did not

detect him; it took a 10-Cent phone call from an ordinary citizen. In the UK, for example, there are around 4,000,000 CCTV cameras; 1,000,000 of which are in London alone. Yet according to The Telegraph (Hope, 2012) and based on official police figures, only one crime was solved per 1,000 CCTV cameras during 2011. This tends to put things into some perspective.

As regards training, any courses must be bespoke. Taking an off the shelf course from one country and simply transplanting to another may seem a 'quick fix' and the cheaper option but it is only folly. A proper training needs analysis and needs assessment, should be carried out in advance. This will then inform the content of the training. In Jordan, the author involved the King Abdullah Police Training Centre at an early stage and went so far as to request two local police trainers, with an interest in this area, first attend the training and later 'assist' with its delivery. This ensures local buy-in, ownership and also provides the foundations for an exit strategy as ultimately such programmes should be about capacity building and sustainability.

The Community

The title of this paper uses the words 'challenging environments'. The author is not therefore discussing the introduction of community policing in some leafy and affluent suburb (although these can pose their own particular 'challenges'). Rather the focus is on what could be termed as 'difficult regions'. A common trait of such areas is that there are often divided communities. The author has direct experience of this in Northern Ireland where it is often confused with religion (protestant and catholic) but is in fact political aspirations Loyalists and Nationalists, in Kosovo Albanian and Serbian and in Southern Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz and Uzbek and so on.

Ultimately in such circumstances, the police are favoured more by one side than the other and this is often reflected in its make up and recruitment practices. In Northern Ireland for example, the Royal Ulster Constabulary from the 1970's to 1990's was made up of mainly protestant officers (96 – 97%), In pre-1999 Kosovo, it was Serbian officers, and in Kyrgyzstan mainly Kyrgyz officers. This has led to allegations of collusion between the police and paramilitary organisations in carrying out alleged atrocities against one side of the community.

Following any 'peace' agreement, revolution, uprising etc., there is a period of fragile peace (see United States Institute of Peace, Conflict Curve). This can last for years and again, referring to Northern Ireland, the Peace Agreement was signed in 1998. Yet there still exists, some 19 years later, a state of 'fragile peace'. It could be suggested that a similar scenario also exists in Kosovo and southern Kyrgyzstan.

As citizens seek closure on atrocities from the past, they want to know was there state collusion. Usually the process takes the form of a public inquiry and can take years, cost millions, and be very uncomfortable for government. In June 2010, as a result of such a public inquiry, the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron MP, was forced to make a very public televised apology after an event in 1972 in Northern Ireland whereby members of the British army opened fire on a civilian civil rights protest causing a number of fatalities and serious injuries (*Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry*, 2009).

Against this backdrop attempting to show that the police are transforming and undergoing change can be a mammoth task. One side of the community will remain distrustful whilst the other side will see it as a sell-out of their identity as they no longer see the police as being their 'protectors'. In Northern Ireland, in order to address the religious imbalance in the police, a recruitment campaign was launched which ran from 2000 to 2010. This involved positive discrimination against protestant applicants. Normally an illegal practice in the UK, it was legislated for and known as 50/50 recruitment. In effect, what this meant was that applicants of roman catholic religion were favoured over those from the protestant community. In the beginning this was deeply unpopular with protestants but as time passed it became just another price to pay for peace and although remaining unpopular with one side was, reluctantly, accepted as a necessity if Peace was to be maintained. In 2012 (following the 50/50 recruitment phase) the representation of catholic officers in the new Police Service of Northern Ireland was approximately 37% (PSNI, 2012).

Conclusion

Community policing is by no means a 'cop out' or an easy option. To the skeptic, the slightest increase in crime figures, which can sometimes follow its introduction, leads them to draw the conclusion that police are failing in their job. Little

consideration is given to the fact that the crime was probably always there and always at that level, but as citizens now have better access to police, confidence is beginning to increase and whereas before there was a fear of coming into any contact with police, citizens begin to feel more at ease with this new 'style' of policing. Hence it is reporting which increases, not the actual number of crimes.

One can understand how, what was seemingly an attractive and simple proposition, can quickly turn into a daunting task. The bigger picture must be laid out on the table from the outset and the roadmap to achieving this must show all the pitfalls and hazards associated with it together with the more positive outcomes.

Careful consideration must be given in advance as to how this will be presented and avoid the temptation to merely 'throw' funding at it. Community policing is only one of many methods and should not be seen as a panacea for all ills. It should 'fit' in with other parts of the organisation if not permeate throughout. It cannot be practiced in isolation. There has to be organisational buy-in and every officer must have a basic understanding of what the community policing ethos for the organisation is. As often is suggested, community policing is to be treated as a 'philosophy'.

In the end a lot will hinge on how community policing is presented at the outset both by international donors (PAPs) to the police and by the police to the communities they serve. 'Buy-in' can be short lived if little regard to advance planning is given. A well thought out implementation strategy, set in proper context for the region, will provide a greater prospect of success and sustainability long after donors have left.

Acknowledgements

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