

Strategies to improve community policing

Partnerships between the state and communities have long been billed as a key means to redress many of South Africa's most serious social ills. And yet a history of top-down state structures, a civil society weakened by decades of Apartheid social planning, and growing resentment over ongoing inequalities and injustices - have all combined to make realising community partnerships extremely difficult. These issues are particularly serious in the case of policing, where a history of repression and an ongoing crime epidemic have resulted in extremely low levels of trust between communities and their police force. This lack of trust frequently undermines efforts to bring communities into policing activities, despite the fact that communities remain well placed to make a very significant effort in closing the capacity constraints and limitations of the SAPS.

Community Policing is a holistic concept with two core pillars: inclusion of community members in policing activities, and a new respect for human rights and care for community members. The concept primarily dates from the transition to democracy, in which the need to rebuild trust between the police and their communities launched a number of initiatives.¹ Regulatory documents like the Community Policing policy framework and guidelines (CPPFG) of 1997 emphasised the importance of the approach, and laid out initiatives such as the establishment of Community Police Forums (CPFs), and the rollout of a comprehensive training programme on community policing.

Unfortunately, the initial promise of community policing quickly ran into difficult realities on the ground. The crime epidemic of the late-1990s led to a shift in the SAPS, towards strategies like 'back to basics' or visible policing, which included a much reduced focus on community policing. Rapid recruitment drives stretched training resources and hiring standards, and stifled efforts to develop a community-focus among officers. Where community policing continued, it was often hampered by contradictory interpretations of the partnership, in which the police saw the community as crime fighting informants, while the community saw the CPFs as a means to provide oversight of the police. Cooperation with police officers was stifled by a lack of trust in the SAPS, and by strained resources, which limited the police from actively participating in community activities on a regular basis.

Despite this, South African communities tend to be active in policing, but most of this takes place through either the employment of private security companies or the creation of local community watch groups. The dominant model is thus one of private community policing, in which the SAPS plays an increasingly marginal role. This approach lacks the accountability of partnerships with the police, and tends to be limited to wealthier neighbourhoods that can afford expensive private patrols. Even when community groups succeed in identifying and preventing

¹ Historical information the community policing is based on Minnaar, A. 2009. "The Changing face of 'community policing' in South Africa, post-1994", Acta Criminologica, CRIMSA 2009 Conference Special Edition, no.2/2010.

criminal activities, this often comes along with abuses of the rights of the accused, and fails the standards of compassionate and rehabilitative justice.

Improving community policing is very complicated, and specific strategies may need to be devised at the precinct-level, to account for the scale of diversity and complexity inherent to the various communities. At national level, three interventions could support these efforts.

First, is to urgently clarify the relationship between the SAPS and private security companies. This has been an ongoing effort, with multiple neighbourhood partnerships being formed on an ad hoc basis. The Private Security Industry Regulation Amendment Bill has the potential to create a national framework for such efforts, but the bill has been a victim of its ever expanding mandate, and the controversy around its ownership and national security provisions. A more practical, partnership-focused framework is needed, one that cements a relationship between the two major policing forces in the country.

Such a framework would enable a number of practical and relatively easy victories. Aligning the reporting systems of SAPS and private security could help with information sharing, and empower private security agencies to take on some of the paperwork burden involved in reporting. Coordinating patrol schedules and emergency response procedures could reduce workforce burdens for both sides; while regulations to compel private security agencies to offer support to poorer neighbouring areas (modelled on requirements such as those that require private hospitals to provide critical need to those in imminent danger) could make for a more equitable distribution of policing. Whether we like it or not, private security companies are now the primary interface between policing and the community. These linkages should be leveraged by the SAPS, to build a network of connections that strengthens both state and private security, and extends oversight to private providers.

Second, is to invest in the revitalisation of Community Policing Forums. This cannot repeat the mistakes of the past, and a number of changes will be needed. As a first step, the purpose of specific CPF meetings should be clarified, to avoid each session become a mess of conflicting aims split between information sharing, partnership development, and police oversight. A specific IPID-led process should make use of CPFs for oversight, with days set aside when the focus will be on hearing community members complaints about police.

A separate stream of meetings should focus on the more cooperative parts of the partnership. This stream of work should primarily be driven by the communities, in partnership with local neighbourhood watches and private security companies. Realistically speaking, senior police officers will struggle to make time for consistent attendance of meetings, and unmet commitments to do so can lead to frustration and resentment. Instead, focus should be placed on CPFs acting as guides to community interactions with the police. For example, CPF representatives should be empowered to assist community members in completing crime reporting forms, lifting the paperwork burden on both the community and police, while improving crucial reporting statistics. Funding for a network of CPFs is unrealistic, but simple interventions,

like hosting an annual city- or provincial-level meeting of CPFs, could help community members feel a sense of status and pride in their work on the forums, and maintain participation.

Third, is to directly address many of the systems issues that undermine trust in the SAPS. While it is easy to say that community policing is stifled by a lack of trust, the reality is that much of that trust-gap is a direct result of a dysfunctional police force. While pockets of performance do exist, front line police officers remain poorly trained, under capacitated, and operate in a bureaucratic system that is decades out of date. Officers are frequently exposed to the worst moments in people's lives, and with an almost nonexistent counselling system and a lack of proper rotation of staff, it is inevitable that officers become suspicious or even hostile to the community they serve.

The failure of community policing cannot be disconnected from these broader structural problems in the South African Police Force, and the lack of a clear vision for reform is shocking for a country plagued with among the worst rates of violent crime anywhere in the world. Building a police force that prioritises the protection of officers and that makes being a police officer a path to a rewarding and profitable career is a necessary precondition for changing the behaviour of officers. While some improvements can be made in the meantime, the community of the police needs to be fixed before it can serve the broader community of the precinct.