Improving Police-Community Relations in Nigeria: Issues at Stake

Paper Presented by
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Introduction

In an ideal society, the police at all times ought to be servants of the people. If this is the case there would be no antagonism and hostility between the police and the communities they serve. However, the literature on police and policing reveals that the police are often in conflict with a significant percentage of the population in almost all countries of the world (Alemika, 1999; Reiner, 2000; Alemika and Chukwuma, 2000). This is so for largely two factors. Firstly, modern societies are diverse in economic, social and cultural compositions, which means that the police cannot be neutral in respect of competing and sometimes antagonistic class relations no matter how hard they try. Secondly and perhaps most importantly police are agencies of the state employed to maintain the social order in which the interests of the rulers and the dominant economic class are paramount. Therefore, police enforcement of the laws and maintenance of social order which promote the interests of the rulers to the detriment of the majority of the population, inevitably put them in hostile relations with their host communities across countries (Alemika, 1999).

However, the nature and extent of police-community antagonism differs from one society to another; from one government to another; and of course from one police force to another. Among the major determining factors are:

1. The social structure of the society: The more unequal and uncaring a social order is the more hostile the relationship between the police and the marginalized sections of the society would be.

2. Police internal control systems: If the police internal control system is proactive, internalized by police officers and rigorously enforced through formal and informal mechanisms, the police in that society would be less disposed to antagonizing the communities they serve.

3. The nature, scope and extent of contact between the police and the community serve: If the scope and nature of interactions between the police and the community they serve are restricted to involuntary law enforcement encounters such as arrests, stop and search encounters, detention etc. the relationship that would ensue from such contacts would be involuntary and hostile. Whereas if the people and the police have other avenues of meeting and understanding each other their relationship would be less hostile and friendly.

Our argument in this paper is that a combination of unequal social order; weak police internal control system and the largely involuntary nature of police-community interactions in Nigeria have made police community relations in the country one of the most antagonistic and hostile in the world. It therefore means that if the relationship between the Nigeria police Force and the people of Nigeria is to improve, reform efforts would have to target the three levels identified above and tackle them almost simultaneously. The paper is divided into four sections. Section one looks at the social
structure of Nigeria in which the police discharge their functions and its impact on the relations between them and the people they police. Section two critiques the internal system of the Nigeria Police Force. Section three provides an analysis of the nature and scope of contact between the police and the Nigerian people. Finally, section four concludes the paper and recommends steps that should be taken by government, police and civil society groups to improve police-community relations and partnership in Nigeria.

1. **Social Structure and Policing in Nigeria**

In his article on police community relations in Nigeria, what went wrong, Alemika (1999:73) argues that, “any attempt to understand policing and police-community relations must begin with the analysis of the social structure that is policed.” This is so because police forces are created to defend the prevailing social, economic and political structure and in very substantive ways mirror the contradictions and conflicts as well as human cooperation in society. According to Coatman (1959: 8):

> … a student of the political institutions of any country desirous of understanding the “ethos” of any country’s government can hardly do better than make a close study of its police system, which will provide him with a good measuring rod of the actual extent to which its government is free or authoritarian.

If the police mirror the contradictions in society, their relationship with the community they serves must inevitably reflect the political, social and economic divisions in society. Thus the character of police-community relations will be determined by the extent of division, inequality and conflicts between the rulers and the rest of the society as well as the extent to which every member of the society have a sense of belonging and wellbeing. Consequently, police-community relations will be less hostile and friendly if society:

- Runs a democratic system of government in content and posture;
- Maintains an economic system in which concern for growth, equity and welfare of all the citizens are given priority attention;
- Maintains legislative and judicial systems, which ensures adherence to the rule of law by the low and mighty as well as the protection and promotion of human rights.

Conversely, a totalitarian or repressive regime will create conditions for hostile police-community relations. The pillar of a totalitarian society, argues Alemika (1999) is a police state.

In Nigeria, it cannot be argued that the economic, social and political system has remained largely exploitative and oppressive of the vast majority of the citizens. Consequently, the Nigerian police in trying to conserve and reproduce that status quo have conducted and continued to conduct themselves in manners that are adversarial to the oppressed and marginal strata of the Nigerian society and by so doing setting the stage for the continuing conflictual relationship they have with the majority of the population.
The struggles for decolonization and independence in Nigeria were vigorously waged and predicated on the belief by the majority of the anti-colonial activists and ordinary people that self governance, which political independence promised would bring an end to the oppression and exploitation, and a transformation of the socio-political and economic forces and institutions that sustain them, which includes the Nigeria Police Force. But that did not happen. in the case of the police, Adisa, (1999:7) notes:

Many people thought that from being the enemies of the people the police would become friends of the people as well as the custodians of law and order in society. Regrettably, this has not turned out to be so. Almost four decades after independence, the police are yet to change its orientation to a people oriented police force....

The police could not change the hostile character of its relationship with the people at independence because the unequal economic, social and political structure of the Nigerian society did not undergo any radical change in 1960. What the country witnessed was change of the color of the rulers and not the content of their character or manner of behaviour. They retained all the colonial oppressive structures and policies and used the police to enforce them.

Consequently, the police have continued to be accountable to the rulers (as they did under colonial rule) who often are neither legitimate representatives of the citizens nor accountable to the people. The first and fundamental problem with police-community relations in the country is that the nation’s successive governments were largely not expression of aspirations, interests and will of the people. They were often usurpers of people’s power and sovereignty through violence (coup) and electoral fraud; exploiters of the people, as well as mass poverty, ignorance, homelessness, ill-health, etc. on the vast majority of the population. These conditions foster antagonism between the government and the citizens. Police are recruited to suppress the opposition of the citizens against government. In the circumstances, police-community relations cannot but be hostile (Alemika, 1999). The next section looks at the internal control systems in the Nigerian police.

2. **Internal Control System of the Nigeria Police Force**

Internal control systems can be defined in general terms as core values, processes and mechanisms through which police authorities regulate and guide the daily activities of their institutions and confront individual acts of wrongdoing. They also offer an important line of defense against corruption and abuse in a police force and provide a key measure of police authorities’ will to hold their personnel accountable for abuse and other misconduct or inappropriate behavior and by so doing promote positive relations with the community (Neild, 2000). When effective, internal controls systems can assist in analyzing and changing the regulatory and management systems and practices of the police to refine their capabilities and improve their performance, both in their effectiveness and ethics.
Generally speaking, there are different types and levels of internal controls in every police force. These include training, core values, regulations, procedural manuals, code of conduct and disciplinary mechanisms. In this section, we shall focus on examining the disciplinary mechanisms in the Nigeria Police Force as the mechanism whose activities that directly affects police-community relations in the country.

The Nigeria Police Force has a multi-layered internal disciplinary system that can theoretically be invoked by members of the public that are aggrieved by acts of police misconduct. These mechanisms include verbal or written complaints to any superior police officer about acts of misconduct involving his or her subordinates and if the complainant is dissatisfied with the action of the superior officer could complain to higher officers including the office of the Inspector General of Police. Such complaints could also be sent to the police Public Complaints Bureau (PCB) located in the police public relations department of every state police command or to the police Provost Department at the Force headquarters, which are responsible for investigating acts that negate police ethics and profession with a view to finding out the genuineness of such complaints or otherwise (Ogbonna, 2001). The police provost department is also responsible for conducting orderly room trial against erring police officers (Ogbonna, 2001).

Within the offices of the Force Criminal investigation Department (FCID), there is also the X-Squad made up of plain clothes police personnel who occasionally conduct surveillance on the activities of patrol officers and those on checkpoint or stop and search duties. Successive Inspectors General of Police also established ad hoc monitoring units that reported directly to them and are usually called IGP’s Monitoring Unit (MU). A review of these internal disciplinary mechanisms within the Nigeria Police Force reveals that they are highly discriminatory against the poor, reactive in nature instead of proactive, accorded less attention in terms of budget and are unwieldy or haphazard in coordination.

Reactive and Discriminatory

It is usually only when the police are being vilified by the press for egregious violations of human rights such as extra-judicial killing or when the victim is a prominent person that you mostly hear about their internal disciplinary systems. On those occasions the police would either dismiss such erring officers from service or quickly convocate orderly room trials ostensibly to douse public anger against the activities of its officers. While it could be argued that the number of police officers investigated or disciplined for acts of misconduct has greatly increased since the inauguration of an elected government in 1999, information or statistics on culprits, their offences and the processes through which they were disciplined are hardly available in the public domain. The list of the individuals is only provided reactively and on an ad hoc basis when the police come under severe public criticisms for not doing much to bring its erring members to book. Furthermore, you cannot simply work into a police station and get statistics on complaints or even commendations that officers have received in the course of their work within a given period. You usually have to apply and go several times before they would be made available to you, if at all they do. This gives the impression that such statistics are
prepared to suit the occasion in question and not a routine or regular feature of police work and administration, which would have assisted them in tracking officers that are subjects of unusually high number of complaints and disciplinary sanctions.

*Discipline as a less priority*

Successive chiefs of police at federal and state level in Nigeria have failed to recognize discipline and disciplinary mechanism as tools that could be used in a fair and consistent manner to remove those police officials who are undermining police effective and improved pubic relations in the country. This could be gleaned from the priority areas of concern, resource allocation to disciplinary mechanisms and more importantly absence of periodic review of the disciplinary system. Police authorities in Nigeria hardly publish priority areas of concern of their administration. And when they do, such articulation rarely goes beyond identification of armed robbery and establishment of ad hoc taskforces to tackle it, which hardly provides more that momentary succor. Exceptions to this rule was the eight-point agenda drawn up by the former Inspector General of Police, Mr. Tafa Balogun and the elaborate 10-point priority agenda published by the current Inspector General of Police, Mr. Sunday Ehindero on assumption of office in January 2005. These two priority agenda (especially the fairly elaborate one drawn by the current Inspector General strategy) are commendable given the fact that they are innovations in the contemporary history of the Nigeria Police Force. However, there is absence of a plan for their implementation or measurable indicators or benchmarks for evaluating them. In the final analysis, the priority agenda become mere shopping lists rather than well articulated strategies for police transformation.

*Lack of budgetary Allocation*

A further proof that discipline has low placement in the Nigeria Police Force, can be seen from the fact that none of the disciplinary mechanisms in the Nigeria Police has an annual budget for its operations. The personnel are equally not provided with the logistics such as transportation to the scene of inquiry rapidly and investigate citizens’ complaint against the police. Almost all of these mechanisms, especially those at the state level such as the police Public Complaints Bureaus (PCB) have no writing materials for recording complaints, working telephone lines, fax machine and computer sets for keeping tracks of the complaints. They depend on rare handouts from the police authorities to carry out their functions, which enables them to achieve anything but contempt from the citizens. As a result citizens lack confidence in them and rarely bother to send their complaints to them. A fall out of the resource constraints facing them and the low status they enjoy in police hierarchy of issues of importance is that the internal disciplinary mechanisms are hardly evaluated to find out how they are performing by the police authorities and what are required to make them perform optimally.
Lack of Coordination and Documentation

Lack of coordination and documentation is another major problem facing the various internal disciplinary mechanisms in the Nigeria Police Force. This is caused by the fact that there are too many of such mechanisms; lack of interaction by both the personnel in charge of the mechanisms and the information or statistics they generate; the casual manner with which most complaints against the police are received and treated; and the fact that there is no mandatory record keeping and tracking system to provide some protection against police efforts to dismiss or cover up complaints.

3. The Nature, Extent and Scope of Contact

Police and citizens are in constant daily contacts. These contacts may be voluntary or involuntary. The nature, extent and scope of contacts influence police-public relations. According to White et al (1991: 20):

Interacting with citizens constitutes an important part of a police officer's daily activities. Many aspects of these interactions have the potential for influencing how the police and citizens perceive and evaluate each other ... Research over the years has established the fact that contacts between the officers and citizens influence police-community relations in major ways, often for the worse ...Citizens often bring to the interaction an array of attitudes and preconceived notions about the police and their conduct... Likewise, the officer brings to the interaction a similar attitude of presumptions, prejudices, and perceptions of the citizen. Prior research has established that the officer is sometimes ... prejudiced, callused by contacts with undesirable and unrepresentative population elements, and is trained to assert authoritative control in these contacts. In addition, the police culture abounds with perceptions of the public as uncooperative, unsupportive, and antagonistic towards the police.1

Police-citizen contacts are characterized by prejudice and preconceived notions. The citizens, therefore, tend to resist the police and the latter try to assert their authority. These are two important factors in police-citizens violence. Antagonism and violence between the police and citizen tend to be higher in societies where the police concentrate on law enforcement than in societies where the police blend law enforcement and social welfare services. Except the police see themselves as "part of the social fabric of a community, they will be perceived as an alien force, and, unless they are clearly visible in their roles of helping people in trouble, they will be seen as a mercenary army of enforcers."1 In Nigeria, the "acute shortage of personnel has reduced the police to crime fighters [which they do very ineffectively due to qualitative and inadequacy of men, material and money] to the detriment of the diversification of police functions found in western societies."2 The provision of social services by the police creates opportunities for non-coercive contacts between them and citizens. In Nigeria:

Few members of the public see the police as friends, instead the sight of police is considered synonymous with trouble. This is partly because in the absence of a social
service dimension in police work in Nigeria, the police pre-occupations or routine police work revolve around stop and question/search, arrest, crime investigation, detention, prosecution, riot and crowd control, and armed combat against violent criminals and guarding of the rich and powerful. Consequently, there are rather too few positive attributes of policing that can be projected.

In year 2000, the CLEEN Foundation conducted a national study on the root causes of police-community violence in Nigeria, in which questions were introduced to gauge the nature, extent and scope of contact between the police. This research shows that there is an extensive contact between the citizens and police in Nigeria. Such contacts occur in the course of police operations in the following areas:

- Crime prevention, especially through stop and search at road blocks (checkpoints) on highways;
- Crowd and riot control;
- Detection, investigation, apprehension and prosecution of offenders;
- Detention;
- Bail of suspects, pending or prior to arraignment in court;
- Request of assistance by crime victims;
- Request for location of missing persons and recovery of lost properties.

The study found out that 68 percent of the respondents had ever been stopped and searched by the Nigeria Police and that most of the contacts took place in a vehicle while on a journey. The data further shows that about a third (33.8%) of the respondents had ever been arrested before by the police. Among those arrested, over 50 percent of them had been arrested twice or more. Many of them were arrested for traffic offences (27%); fighting or assault (22.2%); theft (18.3%) and strike or protest (13.3%). The data also reveal that less than a third (28.3%) of the respondents had ever been detained for three or fewer days.

This information show that police and citizen contacts, though relatively significant, have occurred mostly in pursuance of law enforcement objectives by police. The restrictive contacts between the police and citizens in Nigeria, against the background of the country’s political and economic structures discussed in the preceding section, contribute to or escalate mutual hostility between the police and citizens, which occasionally results into violent encounter. The frequency, content and consequences of contact between the police and citizens are not randomly distributed. The poor and powerless, according to criminological literature are disproportionately and discriminately subject to police surveillance and violence (Hahn, 1970; Alemika, 1993). Police-citizens contacts have significant impact on police-public relations. For example, in Nigeria, certain groups in the public (students, the educated, some occupations, e.g. taxi drivers) have a much more negative view of the police than does the general public, which having little education and knowledge of their rights and much experience with the police.
Table 1: Contact with the Police

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level and Location of Contacts</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Ever stopped and searched by the Nigeria police</td>
<td>68.8 (432)</td>
<td>31.2 (196)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Location of Stop and Search Contacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) In a vehicle on a journey</td>
<td>66.1 (294)</td>
<td>33.0 (147)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) In a vehicle within town</td>
<td>32.1 (142)</td>
<td>67.4 (298)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) On a street</td>
<td>18.1 (26)</td>
<td>81.9 (362)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Within residence</td>
<td>5.9 (26)</td>
<td>94.1 (414)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) At work or school</td>
<td>6.8 (30)</td>
<td>93.2 (412)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Period or time of contact

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Day time</td>
<td>61.0 (316)</td>
<td>39.0 (200)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Evening</td>
<td>23.8 (123)</td>
<td>76.2 (394)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Night</td>
<td>21.6 (111)</td>
<td>63.1 (402)</td>
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</table>

6. Ever arrested by Nigeria Police

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Ever arrested by the Nigeria police</td>
<td>33.8 (210)</td>
<td>66.2 (412)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

7. Number of times ever arrested

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Once</td>
<td>49.0 (119)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(b) twice</td>
<td>30.0 (73)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) thrice or more</td>
<td>21.0 (51)</td>
<td>-</td>
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8. Offence for which arrested

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Traffic</td>
<td>27.1 (64)</td>
<td>71.3 (169)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Theft</td>
<td>18.3 (44)</td>
<td>81.3 (195)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Fighting and assault</td>
<td>22.2 (53)</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Strike or protest</td>
<td>13.3 (32)</td>
<td>86.7 (208)</td>
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9. Ever lived with a police in same compound

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Ever lived with a police in same compound</td>
<td>31.3 (197)</td>
<td>67.7 (426)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationships between occupation and likelihood of being stopped, searched, arrested and detained by the police were also examined in the study. The data show that the likelihood of being stopped and searched, arrested and detained vary across occupation. Commercial drivers and motor park touts reported the highest rate of stop and search, and arrest/detention by police. This is understandable, because, table 1 shows that two-third of those who reported having ever been stopped and searched, stated that this occurred at police checkpoints or highways.

Table 2: Occupation and stop/search, arrest and detention
The data show that respondents had relatively high level of contacts with the police. The contacts were in the form of stop and search, arrest and detention. These are forms of involuntary contacts, which in effect impinge on citizens' freedom and may heighten police-citizen hostility. An irony of increased police surveillance and proactive aggressive policing tactics in order to prevent and control crime, according to Wilson (1975: 121) is that they tend to:

Multiply the occasions on which citizens are likely to be stopped, questioned or observed. Inevitably, the great majority of the persons stopped will be innocent of any wrongdoing; inevitably many of these innocent persons believe the police are harassing them….

The frequent contact between citizens and police who, in the course of their duties, are uncivil to the public and who sometimes abuse their power to extort money are sources of violence between the police and citizens. Citizens become defiant if police are uncivil and corrupt. The police interpret the defiant demeanor of the citizens as a challenge to their authority, and may sometimes resort to violence in order to assert their authority.

4. **Conclusion and recommendations**

This paper examined police community relations in Nigeria and identified structural and institutional factors that militate against harmonious and friendly relations between the police and the communities they serve. At the structural level the paper argued that the oppressive and exploitative economic, social and political system in the country created a wide gulf between the citizens and the rulers. The police enforcement of the unpopular and repressive laws enacted by rulers engenders conflict between them and the people.

At the institutional level the paper argued that the internal disciplinary system of the Nigeria Police were highly discriminatory against the poor, reactive in nature instead of proactive, accorded less attention in the police priority issues and are unwieldy or
haphazard in coordination. Thus, the highly level of hostility between the police and the larger segment of the society who are poor and vulnerable.

The involuntary nature and scope of contact between the police and the public in Nigeria was also identified as a major source of friction between the police and the public. The paper argued that the restrictive contacts between the police and citizens in Nigeria, against the background of the country's political and economic structures contributes to or escalates mutual hostility between the police and citizens, which occasionally results into violent encounter.

The following recommendations are offered steps as that should be taken by the government, the police and civil society groups to improve and ensure positive police-community relations in Nigeria:

1. The country must restructure its political and economic structure towards democratizing the polity, and promoting economic efficiency and competitiveness with due consideration for and guarantee of social equity and welfare, especially in the provision of health, education and housing for the needy.

2. Corruption, which is an important motivation for political repression and a major cause of economic and social backwardness in the country, should be tackled more vigorously. This will reduce the high level of corruption in the top hierarchy of government and private institutions. The existence of corruption at these levels, encourage corruption at other levels, especially by law enforcement agents. Effective anti-corruption programme in the country will also promote effective and efficient allocation and management of resources for national development and provision of social services.

3. The Leadership of the police in Nigeria needs to make police discipline a national functional policing priority and it needs to start from the top. The importance of leadership as a driving force for culture change in policing institutions has long been identified in the literature (Whisen and Ferguson 1989, Newman 2000). In this regard, the police hierarchy should see disciplinary system as a tool for achieving their values, mission and vision. Disciplinary system can be used proactively to promote a new culture and establish minimum standards for the police as a whole. The system could then be used not only to set clear standards for the institution but could also be used in a fair and consistent manner to remove those police members who are undermining the transformation and effectiveness of the NPF.

4. The police code of conduct contained in the Police Act should be reviewed. This review should seek to reduce the rather lengthy to code to size that could easily be memorized and internalized by police officials in Nigeria. It should emphasize the service nature of police and incorporate standards contained the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials as well as drawn inference from the more recent guidelines on the conduct of police officers on electoral duty in Nigeria. Towards this end, a committee should be set up with members from the

Justice Sector Reform
Police Service Commission (PSC) and the Nigeria Police Force to review the code. They should also solicit the inputs of civil society groups working on police reform in Nigeria.

5. The police leadership needs to streamline the unusually high number of disciplinary mechanisms that presently exist in the force, as they make their work not only ineffective through unnecessary duplications but also create problems in tracking police personnel that are processed through them. For instance there is nothing wrong with merging the work of the police X-squad and Human Rights Units with the police public complaints Bureau (PCB) since the three bodies are involved in processing cases of police misconduct and abuse of human rights. Similarly, the tendency of successive IGPs to establish their own ad hoc mechanism for dealing with police abuse such as corruption and human rights violation should be stopped as they create coordination problems and tend to undermine existing mechanisms. Rather such extant mechanisms should be assisted with resources and personnel to make them more effective.

6. Processes for receiving complaints should include mandatory record keeping and tracking systems to provide some protection against police efforts to dismiss or cover up complaints. Any process by which complaints are screened in order to evaluate which merit a full investigation must be open to public scrutiny to assure that dismissals are valid. Similarly the complaints process should provide guarantees for the security for the complainant against any potential threats or reprisals. The police must also make clear that they will punish any effort to intimidate or retaliate against complainants.

7. The scope of contacts between the police and citizens should be enlarged to include social services delivery by police and regular non law enforcement related meetings should be held with communities in order to create favourable environment for public cooperation with police, in their law enforcement duties.

8. Members of the public should be educated on the role and powers of police, and the significance of public cooperation with police in order to promote an overall individual, community and national security.

9. Policemen and women should be thoroughly screened and tested during their initial training to ensure that they possess good character, and are emotionally stable before they are finally enlisted.

10. The pace and scope of the on going police reform process with emphasis on community partnership and problem-oriented policing strategy should be increased and vigorous public enlightenment campaign about the programme should be launched in collaboration with civil society groups in the country for members of the public to know what it is all about.
11. Finally, civil society organizations need to create programmes, activities and measures that will enhance partnership and cooperation between the public and police. Additionally, the organizations should empower citizens to ensure police accountability and effectiveness in their service delivery functions. Civil society groups can promote these through the mobilization of the public in support of police legitimate efforts as well as the mobilization of citizens against abuse of authority/power, brutality and violence, insensitivity incivility and ineffectiveness by police. Civil society institutions should maintain a strong monitoring, research, training and advocacy capacity on police work in the country.

References


