COVID-19 and Community Policing:

Strengthening citizen trust with security forces in Guinea

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As governments work to contain the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, they have relied on their security forces to maintain a rule of law and help enforce health guidelines. Police, armed forces, and other security groups are playing vital roles in the fight against COVID-19, from enforcing curfews or quarantines to distributing supplies and building medical facilities.

However, in many countries, the police and military have had a long history of abuse of power and human rights violations, which has led to citizen distrust and cynicism overall towards law enforcement. This needn't be the case, however. As we have seen in Guinea, building trust between security forces and citizens can make responses to the current COVID-19 pandemic more effective and can serve as a foundation on which to build a country's resiliency to future crises. The pandemic has created new security and safety challenges. In line with the *Partners for Security in Guinea project's* goal of increasing trust between security forces and citizens to respond to new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, members of the project consortium, the *Centre du Commerce International pour le Développement (*CECIDE, a governance, peace, and security organization) and COGINTA (a police reform and community safety organization), supported concrete COVID-19 prevention and mitigation activities.

A cornerstone of the Partners for Security in Guinea project's approach is community policing. Community policing brings police and communities closer at the local (*quartier*) level by encouraging police to work with local leaders, including youth and women. It also incorporates inclusive problem solving wherein police and local leadership jointly identify and address community security problems through existing neighborhood councils in the regions of Kindia, Kankan, Mamou, Siguiri, Labé, and Conakry.

Supporting community policing efforts is critical in the context of COVID-19. Police can play a positive role during the crisis by providing access to information and basic human services, respecting human rights and protecting the most vulnerable, adopting inclusive problem-solving processes, and engaging communities in responses and recovery plans.

The role and effectiveness of security forces in response to the pandemic will be scrutinized closely. The success of COVID-19 responses and recovery plans will be measured not just by health and economic recovery but by how citizens—including women, youth, the most vulnerable—have been involved and how their human rights have been respected.

As nations move toward population deconfinement, and in some cases re-confinement, law enforcement agencies will continue to play a key role in supporting the implementation of public health measures to contain COVID-19 and preventing opportunistic crime. This offers an opportunity to rethink overall approaches to security. Government and security sector leaders should promote approaches that strengthen trust between security forces and citizens through increased and collaborative problem-solving. It is more important than ever for security forces to rely on relationships with community leaders and networks to urge citizens to comply with public health guidelines.

In countries around the world, security forces have played a critical positive role during COVID-19. Ghana's armed forces deployed a state-of-the-art level II field hospital in the greater Accra as part of the government's COVID-19 response. Likewise, armies in the US, Serbia, Sweden, Italy, and elsewhere built field hospitals to bolster their nations' capacity to treat COVID-19 patients. In Israel, the Minister of Defense became deeply involved in the country's health response and even requested to be put in charge of the country's national response instead of the health ministry.

However, not all security services' contribution in this global fight have been positive. Allegations of police brutality have surfaced in several African countries and across the world. As countries moved to restrict citizens' movements to control the spread of the deadly virus, heavy-handed tactics have led to serious human rights violations and fatalities. In some cases, police and armies have used excessive force against citizens who were performing essential activities. Medical doctors, journalists, men, women, youth, taxi-drivers, business owners, worshippers, even toddlers, have had difficult encounters with the police and even faced human rights violations.

The arguable leading example of a poorly managed security sector response has been in India with multiple incidents of harsh repercussions for those not obeying the curfew restrictions. In Niger, where government-imposed rules prohibit protest and public gatherings under the pretext of public health and safety, citizens who gathered for a public demonstration to decry the alleged embezzlement of funds by the Minister of Defense were met with a harsh response. Three people died when security forces fired a teargas bomb, which landed on an entangled pile of fabric, potentially causing a large-scale fire.

Videos of rough arrests, such as this one by French police, went viral on social media. In India, videos of police beating worshippers and others who had violated the country's imposed COVID-19 curfew made people too afraid to leave their homes even to buy food. In Nigeria, the Human Rights Commission reported that security services had killed at least 18 people by mid-April to enforce the COVID-19 lockdown, more than the 12 people who died in the same time frame due to coronavirus. In China, security forces used race as a weapon to target African immigration populations mainly in Guangzhou. Civil society organizations, unions, human right activists, and citizens using social media have denounced these human rights violations.

Encouragingly, national leaders and courts are stepping up to denounce violence by security services. For example, both Presidents Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya apologized for or condemned violence carried out by security officers, causing severe injuries and deaths. In Uganda a court charged 10 police officers with "aggravated torture" for allegedly "forcing dozens of women to rub mud on their genitals as punishment for breaking a coronavirus curfew." In his apology, President Kenyatta sought to reassure Kenyans that now was the time to rebuild collaboration between security services and the citizens they serve. "I want to assure you that if we work together, if we all understand that this problem needs all of us, and if we pull in the same direction, we will overcome," he broadcasted to his compatriots.

What have PartnersGlobal and its project partners been doing in Guinea to strengthen trust between security forces and citizens?

Over the last decade, many African countries have undertaken Security Sector Reform (SSR). One aspect of such reform is to promote policing that serves citizens in a way that effectively protects citizens and their property, is respectful of human rights and individual freedoms, and is professional, responsible, and accountable.

PartnersGlobal's community policing approach enables police and security forces to identify and address the root causes of crime and delinquency to strengthen prevention activities. The approach builds resiliency to cross-cutting challenges such as a pandemic. Strengthening citizen trust and communication with security forces is important for many reasons, including effectively responding to pandemics such as COVID-19 and any future Ebola outbreaks.

For five years (2015–2020), in collaboration with local partners CECIDE and COGINTA, **PartnersGlobal** has been implementing the *Partners for Security in Guinea* project with the goal of building trust between the police and citizens.

At the community level, security forces also build relationships with traditional leaders (district chiefs) and existing networks of women and youth, all of whom have traditionally played a central role in safety and security in Guinea and other African countries. These local leaders are often called on to solve local-level disputes ranging from arguments between neighbors to, occasionally, serious criminal allegations.

Our collective approach as a consortium to building trust between the police and community has been multi-pronged:

- **Train police officers in neighborhood security services, ethics, police behavior, respect of citizens' rights, and on basic policing skills** to improve their performance in exercising their day-to-day responsibilities. The trainings include instruction in how to improve communication with community members as an integral part of effective community policing.

- **Build the capacity of district chiefs** to perform stipulated roles and responsibilities in an effective and efficient manner and to become responsive and accountable in the performance of their functions. Regular community security forums are organized to raise awareness among the local population of the role of district chiefs versus that of the police.

- **Restore trust between women and the police at the grassroots level** to facilitate their collaboration in community safety and crime prevention and ensure that women see the police as their allies in community security. We encourage women's participation in community safety and crime prevention initiatives, train them on the essentials of security and community leadership, and provide ongoing coaching and mentoring to prepare them to participate in the development of community safety action plans. To foster relationship building, we have led members of women's organizations to participate in "visitation days" at police stations.

- **Create a partnership between women and the Police's Office for Women and Children Protection (OPROGEM)**. Dialogues are organized to explain the role and mission of the police and its OPROGEM service and to discuss women's critical role in the fight against gender-based violence and neighborhood insecurity. The dialogues highlight the importance of collaboration between women and the police to reach consensus on common approaches that could foster sustainable synergy in the fight against insecurity and all forms gender-based violence.

- **Increase youth leaders' participation in problem solving and conflict resolution with the police** through strengthening dialogue and partnerships between police, youth-serving agencies, juvenile justice officials, parents, students, and teachers. These efforts promote youth crime prevention and build capacities of youth leaders to engage in community safety initiatives.

- **Establish a "police at school" initiative to promote dialogue between police and students and promote civic education at school.** In some cases, students have even used these forums as an opportunity to approach officers with personal issues such as child marriage, gender-based violence, delinquency and neighborhood insecurity.

Building on existing relationships to respond to COVID-19

In Conakry members of the Partners for Security in Guinea project consortium, CECIDE and COGINTA, supported concrete COVID-19 prevention and mitigation activities. These activities address local safety and security problems in an active partnership with neighborhood leaders, while respecting social distancing and adhering to the Guinean government's guidelines on preventing the spread of COVID-19. The two organizations have forged more productive relationships between police and communities to help them work together to address security challenges.

Local councils for security and crime prevention (CLSPD) in Dixinn and Kaloum (Conakry) have created COVID-19 response teams made up of district chiefs, police commissioners, health officers, and others. These committees have conducted awareness campaigns, implemented locally sensitive prevention measures, and supported contact tracing and identification of potential COVID-19 cases in their communities.

CECIDE

Coach and mentor district chiefs, women and youth leaders to participate in the development of community-based action plans to contain the spread of the coronavirus and to prevent gender-based violence in the context of COVID-19-related restrictions. The aim of these mentorships, conducted in partnership with the national police's gender office, OPROGEM, is to strengthen the capacity of 30 women and youth leaders and 33 neighborhood leaders (district chiefs) on the fundamentals of COVID-19 prevention actions such as managing handwashing stations.

Install 20 handwashing stations in districts of Kaloum and Dixinn. These sanitary stations aim to promote compliance with prevention measures (regular washing of hands with hydro-alcoholic gel, compulsory wearing of protective masks).

Conduct a door-to-door campaign to raise awareness on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Ten outreach teams of three people each, equipped with protective masks and hand sanitizer, are being deployed in the districts for these campaigns that aim to raise awareness of the need for adhering to COVID-19 prevention measures.

Produce a series of flyers to raise awareness about COVID-19 prevention measures. To increase awareness, CECIDE produced 1,000 copies of flyers that include prevention guidelines from the National Health Security Agency (ANSS) distributed to the population by outreach teams in the neighborhoods.

Produce and distribute a one- to three-minute video in three local languages on prevention measures. This video will be made available to neighborhood leaders for distribution to their citizens and will also be broadcast on TV channels, including the national television station.

Distribute COVID-19 prevention kits (buckets, tables, soaps, and hand sanitizer). These kits are being installed in "youth houses", central and urban police stations, and in the Women's Empowerment Centers (CAF) of Kaloum and Dixinn.

COGINTA

COGINTA has implemented new COVID-19-responsive activities that strengthen police/community trust.

Conduct awareness-raising campaign by local councils (CLSPDs) on COVID-19 prevention measures. COGINTA has provided support to CLSPDs to produce and disseminate audio messages on COVID-19 prevention across the 33 districts of the municipalities in Dixinn and Kaloum.

Provide prevention kits to local communities through CLSPDs. These kits, which include small water tanks, soap, and flyers on preventing the spread of COVID-19, have been distributed through women's associations, youth associations, religious and neighborhood organizations, and other outlets.

Train 219 agents from OPROGEM and Neighborhood Security Services (NSS) of Dixinn and Kaloum on preventing domestic violence, which has surged worldwide during the pandemic due to confinement and economic pressures.

Produce and disseminate a short video **targeted to young people on COVID-19 prevention measures.** Presented by the "referent police" *(Policiers Référents)*, the video has been broadcast 20 times on national TV stations (Evasion TV, Espace TV, and RTG) and posted on social media.

Teach police how to adapt their work in communities to the current health emergency context. This training aims to prevent abuse of the population during police checks on compliance with social distancing measures. The pool of police trainers that has been created through the *Partners for Security in Guinea project* conducted awareness-raising activities and peer-to-peer education. In total, 715 police officers have benefited from the trainings. In addition, 4,000 sensitization COVID related equipment were distributed to police to help them better implement government measures while dealing with local crimes.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has unintentionally revealed a deficiency in the global security sector training and emergency preparation. The poor display of civil protection and order by security forces has negatively impact citizen's human rights, therefore widening the lack of trust and creating hostility.

Communities have appreciated security forces actions related to protecting their lives, distributions of goods and supplies, protection of women's rights, etc. In countries like Guinea, while political factors are still tainting the relationships between police and citizens, community policing initiatives with proven track record have played a key role in preventing the spread of the virus and helping communities cope. Civil society organizations and existing local security structures have maintained multi-stakeholder partnerships, collaborative and inclusive strategies to reinforce trust between citizens (with an intentional emphasis on women, youth, vulnerable groups) and security services in the fight against COVID-19.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is widening an already present social divide and capacity for communication and trust between security forces and citizens due to the excessive force that has been exercised during this time; the challenges posed by COVID19 provide police and security forces in general with opportunities to begin engaging communities constructively.

However, this mindset shift will require the engagement of security services leadership at all levels. Strengthening local and national security governance is also an important element of a strategy to deal with any future outbreaks, pandemics, and natural disasters. To be effective, such a strategy must include public health training for police, emphasize building trust between security forces and citizens, engage women and youth in inclusive problem-solving processes, and create a space for dialogue between citizens and the police at the local and neighborhood levels.

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