Nairobi, Kenya: Example of a Legitimate Approach

University of San Diego | KROC SCHOOL Institute for Peace and Justice

peace IN OUR CITIES

"Unless state institutions, particularly (but not only) the police, are viewed as legitimate, efforts to reduce violence while upholding the rule of law will not be successful. Illegitimate police departments ultimately lose effectiveness, as citizens are less likely to cooperate with police. Police–community relations are currently, and have been historically, fraught in various cities, both in developed and developing countries."[1][2]

Research Team

Rose Mbone, Katelyn Alam, Beatrice Nzovu, and Alfredo Malaret Baldo[3]

Introduction and overview of the intervention

The Legend Kenya (TLK),[4] in partnership with the Life & Peace Institute, implemented the intervention Pamoja Mtaani (Community Cohesion) in three informal settlements in Nairobi, Kenya (Korogocho, Kayole, and Mathare) from July to December 2021. By working with the Nairobi County Commissioner and authorities tasked with overseeing law enforcement, the project aimed to address community violence by fostering collaboration between police and citizens through community-led dialogues and community-police joint activities. The project promoted the creation of safe spaces, classifying stations as safe "go-zones"[5] to dissociate local police stations from places of fear and intimidation. Through the project activities, community members from historically marginalized communities—who are often vulnerable to violence from law enforcement—engaged at different levels of decision making to foster community autonomy. By opening spaces for dialogue and community engagement in collaborative efforts to promote community safety, Pamoja Mtaani helped to address historically

1 Trust in the police is higher in Europe and Australia than in the United States. Amelia Cheatham and Lindsay Maizland. "How Police Compare in Different Democracies," *Backgrounder* (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, March 29, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-police-compare-different-democracies. See also articles on police brutality in Africa and Latin America: Patrick Egwu, "As the World Marches for American Victims, Police Brutality in Africa Goes Unnoticed" *Argument* (blog), *Foreign Policy*, June 17, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/17/black-lives-matter-protests-africa-police-brutality/; Beatriz García Nice, "Losing Hearts and Minds: Policing Latin America," Weekly Asado (blog), Wilson Center Latin American Program, July 2, 2021, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/losing-hearts-and-minds-policing-latin-america-0

2 Hernán Flom, *Guiding Principles and Inspiring Actions: Operationalizing the Resolution to Reduce Urban Violence* (Peace in Our Cities, October 2022), https://stanleycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Guiding-Principles-Inspiring-Actions-PiOC.pdf

3 The brief was also reviewed and supported by Flávia Carbonari.

4 TLK is a community-based organization that aims to address conflict mitigation, trauma, healing, awareness, and forgiveness through non-violent methods. For more information, see https://thelegendkenya.org/

5 Specific spaces, both community areas and police stations, had been viewed as "no-go zones," or areas viewed with stress and assumed danger. Creating a 'go-zone" was an effort to destigmatize areas for communities and for officials. Establishing official sites such as police stations as "go-zones" aimed at establishing police sites as locations of safety rather than locations of arrest.

damaged relationships between citizens and law enforcement, contributing to enhance trust and social cohesion. The Peace in Our Cities Incentive Fund financed the project.

Background and rationale

Informal settlements in Nairobi are perceived as places with concentrated, high levels of violence and, as a result, are often stigmatized by security forces, leading to frequent excessive use of police force, illegal arrests, and extrajudicial killings, which further intensifies violence in these areas.[6] These settlements are resultantly afflicted by generational distrust, most acutely between youth and women and the security forces. The animosity is particularly severe with women who have lost children through extrajudicial killings or whose children have been erroneously arrested by security actors. The division is amplified by a long history of either being ignored or heavily discriminated against by the police.[7] Both actions lead to the perception that the police service is not there to protect its citizens and reinforce reliance on non-state actors for security, amplifying the ability of violent networks to control communities.[8] This strained relationship exacerbates generational distrust, opens new grievances, and yields a legitimacy deficit for law enforcement,[9] presenting a difficult barrier to addressing cycles of violence. Ultimately, mutual mistrust between community members and between community and security actors fuels community violence. Therefore, a necessary step in addressing violence was to redefine relationships.

Life in Korogocho, Kayole, and Mathare—some of the largest informal settlements in Kenya, with 150,000–500,000 people—reflect these tense relationships, primarily between youth and women and security actors. Between April and August 2020, Mathare alone reported 17 deaths due to excessive police force.[10]

Building trusting and collaborative relations between communities and law enforcement is a key component to addressing the challenges posed by urban violence effectively.[11] Evidence presented in systematic reviews has shown that accountable and responsive law enforcement yields reductions in violence.[12] Healthy community–law enforcement relationships facilitate effective patrolling, deepen the reach of prevention efforts, allow for offender accountability, and garner collaboration, which leads to a better understanding of community needs, facilitate legitimate enforcement, and can even promote compliance and witness cooperation: all components that can contribute

6 Life & Peace Institute, *Pushed to the Brink: Perceptions of Experiences and Knowledge of Urban Violence in Nairobi* (Nairobi, Kenya: Life & Peace Institute, 2023), https://life-peace.org/resource/pushed-to-the-brink/

7 Mark Weston, *Peace in Our Cities in a Time of a Pandemic: Preventing Violence in Informal Settlements in the Age of COVID-19* (Peace in Our Cities, 2021), https://cic.nyu.edu/resources%20/peace-in-our-cities-in-a-time-of-pandemic-preventing-violence-in-informal-settlements-in-the-age-of-covid-19/

8 Antonio Sampaio, Ken Opala, and Joyce Kimani, *Nairobi, Kenya: Communities in Crisis, Gangs in Charge* (Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime, October 2021).

9 Life & Peace Institute, *Pushed to the Brink.*

10 Sampaio et al., *Nairobi, Kenya*, 10.

11 Robert Wasserman, *Building Relationships of Trust: Recommended Steps for Chief Executives* (Tallahassee, FL: Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 2014).

12 Lorraine Mazerolle et al., "Legitimacy in Policing: A Systematic Review," *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 9, no. 1 (2013): 1–146.

to violence reduction.[13] Thus, an intervention like Pamoja Mtaani was needed to address cycles of mistrust within Nairobi's informal settlements and to contribute to violence reduction in these communities.

Strategic vision: *the what*

To foster community engagement in violence reduction, Pamoja Mtaani established intentional dialogue sessions and outdoor recreational activities between community members, law enforcement, and other state actors that facilitated exchanges and learning between participants and included introspective learning.

The project consisted of three main components:

1. Dialogue sessions intended to rebuild historically fragile relationships between community members and security actors and across communities. These sessions were divided as follows:

- *Youth:* Sessions focused on identity and experiences of female and male youth. Dialogues were highly important due to youth being the major actors of violence within informal settlements (i.e., as victims, perpetrators, and rescuers of victims in many cases) and the probability of them engaging with criminal groups. Youth involvement in violence simultaneously results in strained relationships between youth and security agencies and between youth and the larger community.
- *Women:* Sessions focused on women's experiences of violence within their communities and talked about prevention of violence at the household level.
- *Cross-learning:* Sessions occurred between different community groups and aimed at addressing the "fear of outsiders" by strengthening relationships between different communities.

2. Peace actions, including meal sharing at police stations and clean-up activities to promote environmental awareness, provided connections beyond the conversation in the dialogues. These activities were influenced by the discussions held at the dialogues and significantly helped to diffuse tensions between the different dialogue sessions and to foster cohesion. They were usually accompanied by plays, skits, and other recreational tools to promote a collaborative engagement aimed at humanizing differing groups and fostering a sense of shared community between participants. For many community members, even being in police stations was previously unheard of, so sharing that space through collaborative and recreational actions created an entirely new relational dynamic.

3. Mapping exercises, carried out during dialogue sessions and peace actions, aimed to understand the relationships between security actors, youth, and women and analyze the factors underlying the mistrust. Mapping exercises provided a deeper understanding of factors contributing to violence and allowed groups to engage in productive self-

13 Dietrich Obertwittler and Sebastian Roche, eds., *Police-Citizen Relations Across the World: Comparing Sources and Contexts of Trust and Legitimacy* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

reflection rather than in cycles of blame. Gaining a deeper understanding of violence provided a foundation to rebuild trust between community members with a common goal for violence reduction.

Various activities of the Pamoja Mtaani project aimed to, through dialogue, create spaces conducive to sharing and understanding diverse experiences. Throughout the process, the connections established between participants began to form collaborative relationships and to jointly address conflicts, including violent incidents within communities.

Intervention design: *the how*

The execution of this intervention required participatory design elements and intentional efforts to facilitate community buy-in because, for many community members, law enforcement was viewed as an abusive rather than protective force. These main elements included:

- **Citizen participation:** Activities were community-initiated, designed, and implemented, facilitating an environment of inclusive participation and representation.
- **Focused on legitimacy:** Authorities participated in "good faith," demonstrating an understanding of the urgent need to strengthen their relations with the community through building their credibility and legitimacy.
- **Clear goal:** The project was designed with one unifying goal: increasing trust between the security actors and the communities they serve and among diverse community members.

Project activities were carried out weekly. Officers were requested not to carry arms during those sessions to promote a sense of safety and assurance for community members. Community participants were identified through the already existing implementing partners' networks, such as community (e.g., youth, women, elders) and religious leaders, community-based organizations, and other community members, such as vegetable sellers and garbage collectors.

Dialogues were facilitated by The Legend Kenya team, with government actors represented in each dialogue, including the chief, senior chief, and officers commanding police stations. Initially, dialogues were divided into groups: women, men, and youth. After a few sessions, when communities had started to trust the process, the project combined different groups in the same sessions. Sometimes, one activity influenced the next. For instance, ideas for recreational activities that emerged in one dialogue also helped to ease tensions that had surfaced in the previous meeting, contributing to a more productive discussion in the ensuing dialogue.

Implementation experience: *the who*

Pamoja Mtaani required legitimate community buy-in; therefore, mobilizing community

actors was fundamental to the success of the project. In addition to community residents, other key partners of Pamoja Mtaani were:

- **Nairobi's National Police Service** helped to address cases of police brutality and was crucial in mobilizing police buy-in. Having official support was important to implement the project effectively. Getting the buy-in of individual officers to join dialogue sessions was not as difficult as anticipated due to the common desire for violence reduction.
- **Nairobi County Commissioner's Office** supported the engagement of various security actors (e.g., chiefs and local administrators) in the dialogue process. Government support was critical to the long-term success and expansion of the project.
- **Civil society and community-based organizations** were vital in establishing the legitimacy of the project among community members, supporting them throughout the process.
- **Daima Institute of Peace and Development, with the African Centre for the Constructive for Dispute Resolution Collaborative**, trained 15 project beneficiaries on trauma and counseling. This training was crucial to minimize risks of further harm and revictimization, as most youth and women who participated in the project had experienced or witnessed traumatizing events. The project invoked a range of emotions, and the institute provided the necessary tools for a trauma-healing journey.

Initial project outputs

During the 6 months of implementation, over 700 people engaged in project activities, which allowed different groups to listen to each other and to have conversations about how they could work together to stop violence. In total, there were 300 dialogue sessions and almost 400 outdoor activities in the three communities. An important result from the dialogues was the acknowledgment from law enforcement of past mistakes (i.e., in reference to extrajudicial killings), which led to honest conversations between mothers, youth, and the police on how to work together to prevent new incidents of violence. In addition, the project engaged six police officers as mentors and senior advisors for at-risk youth. After joining the project and gaining trust of local officials, one participant from Kayole, who used to work at a dumping site, also started to work as a peace ambassador and mobilizer of women and youth during peace and security functions.

Anecdotal evidence based on feedback received by the implementing organizations from community members indicates increased trust among key constituents, specifically women and youth, with security actors who committed to working together to achieve a reduction in violent incidents in known "hotspots" across these three informal settlements.[14] Some police officers shared that their work had become easier in these particular communities.

14 "The Legend Kenya," interview with Rose Mbone, *The Movement for Community-led Development*, September 6, 2023, https://mcld.org/2023/09/06/movement-matters-rose-mbone/

Lessons learned and observations for replication

The experience of implementing Pamoja Mtaani rested on a few crucial components. The first was establishing **community buy-in**, which was possible due to the mobilization of key, credible community actors and emphasizing the common goal of reducing community violence. However, **overcoming biases** was imperative; therefore, dialogue sessions and mapping activities had to initially focus on addressing them. The decision to be as inclusive as possible and **not to discriminate** against any individuals, including youth accused of committing crimes, was key in that regard. It was essential to **collaborate with local government actors** to establish the project's legitimacy within law enforcement, secure support from officers, and enable its potential for scalability and long-term sustainability. The **contextualization of experiences** was also key to allowing the project to become a process of healing and building and restoring relationships rather than isolated dialogues. Finally, the inclusion of **recreational activities**, such as meal sharing at police stations, which became central to Pamoja Mtanni and a symbolic activity to mark the end of the project in each community, were essential to (a) help destigmatize police stations as sites of distrust, (b) create a feeling of shared ownership, and (c) provide more opportunities for relationship building and strengthening social cohesion.

Additional lessons learned from the implementation experience and dialogue discussions should inform the replication of the project, including the **need to have a stronger gendered approach to activities**. Such an approach is important given the high rates of gender-based violence in the targeted areas, and the fact that dispute-handling mechanisms are often male dominated, which made some women reluctant to engage as they felt shamed and marginalized during discussions. An explicit gender approach would help to increase awareness of the gendered nature of conflict and violence and promote active and effective participation of women.

Another issue that came out of dialogue sessions was the glaringly inadequate support provided for young people leaving group violence or militia groups, which is central in their resocialization process to prevent them from rejoining these groups. Youth were unable to find employment and found minimal support from the community. Thus, there is a need to include a project component (or develop a specific program) targeted explicitly at enhancing **community reconciliation with youth previously involved in crime** and who are willing to return to the community, **integrating trauma healing and counseling sessions into project activities**.

Similarly, it is integral to promote **intergenerational dialogue**, providing space for youth to contribute their ideas to decision-making processes and to not only be seen as the main actors involved in violence. The youth-versus-elders generational gap often leads to misunderstanding as the voice of the youth is either muffled or silenced. Considering this gap, the project ensured voices of the youth were heard by showcasing the positive contributions made throughout the project's cycle in their respective communities. Over time, the perception of the elders changed with continuous

encouragement to adopt strategies that promote inclusive decision-making processes in the informal settlements.

Finally, although the project focused on internal community relationships across Nairobi, populations have deeply felt the effects of politically instigated violence. Informal settlements are often vulnerable during election periods due to political differences, and the manipulation of youth is at an all-time peak.[15] Although it was beyond the scope of the project to address political violence, community dialogues indirectly assisted in reducing political tension by encouraging political and ethnic tolerance. Going forward, in the Kenyan context, it would be important to **integrate awareness about anticipated politically instigated violence**.

Conclusion

Pamoja Mtaani emerged in a context of violence, tension, and trauma due to a long history of mistrust between communities and law enforcement in three informal settlements of Nairobi. The project's initial results in rebuilding these relationships and promoting social cohesion show that a simple step that could be replicated in other areas of Kenya can make huge strides in building trust. By bringing apparent antagonist actors to mediated dialogue sessions and joint recreational activities in a consistent and structured manner, the project fostered an environment conducive to deep reflection, meaningful discussions, and relationship building, laying foundations for sustainable peace.

15 For more, see Ouma Smith, Daniela Cocco Beltrame, Diana Mitlin, and Beth Chitekwe-Biti, *Informal Settlements: Domain Report* (ACRC Working Paper 2024-09, African Cities Research Consortium, The University of Manchester, February 19, 2024), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4765001