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## What Works

### **Policing the Police: A Nigerian NGO teaches human rights to local law enforcement agencies**

By Catherine DiBenedetto

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## Policing the Police

A Nigerian NGO teaches human rights to local law enforcement agencies *by Catherine DiBenedetto*



Following riots in 2002, Nigerian police patrol the Idi-Araba area of Lagos. Since the end of military rule in 1999, the CLEEN Foundation has worked with officials to make law enforcement more humane.

In 1999 in the Niger Delta town of Odi, a rebel gang called the Asawana Boys ambushed 12 police officers and disarmed, beat, and killed them. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo responded by ordering 5,000 soldiers to “shoot on sight anything that moved” in Odi. Within 14 days, the soldiers had leveled the town of 60,000, burning the people who were too old or young to flee and raping the women who remained.

Six months earlier, the country had installed its first civilian government in 16 years, but violence was a hard habit to break. During General Sani Abacha’s dictatorship, a rise in armed robberies had “justified” human rights abuses such as torture and extrajudicial executions by the police. Highway checkpoints became hotbeds of corruption, occasionally boiling over into violent clashes between civilians and the police. Nigeria’s own representative to the United Nations, Ibrahim Gambari, publicly dismissed the atrocities: “One cannot eat human rights.”

Activist Innocent Chukwuma held his country to a higher standard. As a student, Chukwuma was repeatedly jailed for

leading antirepression protests. In January 1998, on the eve of democracy, he used a \$25,000 award from the Reebok Human Rights Foundation to found the Centre for Law Enforcement Education, now called the CLEEN Foundation. The traditional approach among human rights groups had been accusatory: publicize injustices or sue the government. CLEEN – headquartered at Chukwuma’s dining room table – set out to reform the police from within.

“I came to realize that officers who committed human rights abuses did not do so out of sadistic intentions,” says Chukwuma. “They were simply ignorant of what they were expected to do.” CLEEN acknowledged that officers were underpaid for dangerous and frustrating work. In 1999, there was one policeman for every 1,440 Nigerians. (In New York City, there is one officer per 200 people.) In the absence of forensics, it was nearly impossible to prosecute criminals unless they were caught red-handed. “We didn’t want to expose the police,” says Chukwuma. “We wanted to help them find solutions so that policemen would be respected and rewarded.”

### Cleening Up

One of Chukwuma’s first projects was to survey 993 prisoners, police, and civilians on the roots of police violence. While the report unveiled an incriminating culture of brutality – 77 percent of inmates said that they were tortured – it didn’t sling blame at the police. Instead, it identified a variety of social, political, and economic causes that stretched back to colonial rule. This report and others convinced the federal police chief that CLEEN was, in fact, an ally. “We agreed to work with them because they were trustworthy,” says Baba Mohammed, deputy superintendent of the police. “We both had the same goal: to shrink the gap between our officers and the society.”

The first step was to change the police’s image. Throughout Nigeria’s history, the police were a tool of the state, mistrusted and feared by the people. Now, inside a fledgling democracy, the police were supposed to be accountable to the people. Chukwuma embarked upon a campaign to promote officers as friends with “Constable Joe,” an award-winning radio series that demonstrated what the police could – and could not – legally do. To discourage bribery at checkpoints, CLEEN printed anticorruption bumper stickers for



trucks (“Do not ask me for bribe – I don’t give”) and police cars (“Obey the law – don’t offer me bribe”).

In January 2001, Chukwuma suggested the unthinkable: that the community boss the police. He set up Partnership Forums for police representatives and civilians in 14 of Nigeria’s 36 states. Both sides bristled. “The people couldn’t imagine that police would actually answer their questions,” says Chukwuma. “And the police expected the community to stand up and point fingers.” Instead, the forums deconstructed walls of misperception as the participants discussed topics such as crime prevention and police discipline.

The third piece in the reform puzzle was internal accountability. In 2002, CLEEN mobilized six police commands to reactivate their defunct Public Complaints Bureaus. The organization invested \$4,000 in custom software that allows civilians to track the status of their complaints, and it gave each station a computer, photocopier, telephone, and Internet access. It also advertised the bureaus with radio jingles, posters, flyers, and billboards.

Before 2002, there were no complaints on record. By 2004, 807 grievances had been filed, 169 officers dismissed for extortion, and seven officers ordered to pay the medical bills of battered civilians. In 2003, the government ordered all commands to reopen their complaint desks.

The elections in the spring of 2003 tested the credibility of police intentions. Historically, elections were blood-soaked events in which politicians used the police to dictate votes. Between January and March 2003, a CLEEN staffer worked full time with the Police High Command, the Police Service Commission (PSC, a governmental oversight body), and the Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI, an international NGO) to develop the world’s first guidelines for police conduct during an election. In the days before the polls, the partners distributed 120,000 laminated cards summarizing the guidelines to the police and the public.

“Obviously, the setting of standards does not of itself eliminate all problems,” says Chidi Anselm Odinkalu, OSJI’s senior legal officer and a visiting professor at Harvard Law School. “But it creates mutual expectations and sets an agenda for work that must be done.” In the aftermath of the elections, some 50 officers were investigated for misconduct.

## Growing the Ranks

Despite CLEEN’s programs and improved government policy, “police behavior on the streets has not changed much,” admits Chukwuma. Extortion continues to leak down from the top. In 2005, federal police chief Tafawa Balogun was convicted for stealing 13 billion naira (U.S. \$98 million) from

public funds. Internal reform efforts focus more on the police’s ability to control the public rather than to serve it. For example, a plan to recruit 40,000 additional officers neglected to expand the capacity of training institutions. As Chukwuma wrote in a report, “[a] new wave of these graduates hits the streets every six months and swells the ranks of human rights abusers on the beat.”

Despite the slow pace of change, Chukwuma is optimistic. “They used to arrest me,” he says. “Now they listen to me.” Eight years ago, “human rights” didn’t even exist in the policeman’s vocabulary. In 2005, more than 900 officers were fired for misconduct. Last October, CLEEN and the PSC finalized a set of guidelines for police recruitment, discipline, and promotion.

Although Mohammed says that the police want CLEEN to expand its work to a national scale, the organization’s \$800,000 budget (90 percent of which comes from foreign governments and foundations) isn’t enough. Four years ago, CLEEN actually shrank its scale. The 15-man staff narrowed its focus from 10 states to three cities: Lagos, Kano, and the capital, Abuja, where pilot programs can attract the attention of authorities. The organization reaches into other states by giving technical assistance to 32 local groups. “We believe civil society groups can’t sustain change by ourselves,” says Chukwuma. “At best, we can act as a catalyst.”

CLEEN’s sparks are catching across West Africa. Nigeria is the hinge on which the region swings, politically, economically, and socially. One in six Africans is Nigerian. The country possesses the largest oil reserves in Africa. “In many ways, the fate of West Africa is bound up with that of Nigeria,” says Odinkalu. In December, teams of police leaders, government representatives, and advocates from across the region gathered in Abuja for the inaugural West Africa Conference on Police Reform.

Not every country in the region is quite ripe for reform, says Odinkalu: “You need a police service before you can speak of oversight.” Sierra Leone is just beginning to rebuild its force, which was destroyed after years of civil war. Cote d’Ivoire is still festering with conflict. But when they are ready, he says, countries can look to Nigeria for a model. □

## REFORMING LAW ENFORCEMENT

- Partner with officials
- Develop a positive image of police officers
- Create opportunities for civilian oversight
- Build accountability inside the force