

Community policing in Accra: the complexities of local notions of (in)security and (in)justice

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Introduction

In low-income neighbourhoods of Accra, Ghana's capital, civilian policing groups, known as 'Watch Dogs', have been formed by local residents to deal with their own security and justice needs. In contrast, residents in high-income areas hire private security companies or guards. Moreover, this latter group uses their connections to politicians in the ruling party to lobby the state police to attach greater importance to the security of their area, including, if possible, more public police visibility. It is within this security architecture in general and public policing in particular, that the chapter examines how the poor and densely populated community in Accra called Nima has responded to its security and justice needs.¹

That most people in a place like Nima depend on multiple policing actors to meet their security needs is not peculiar to Ghana. Baker (2006) shows that in urban communities across Uganda and Sierra Leone, residents have resorted to a wide range of policing groups to meet their security needs. The inability of the state-sanctioned police to provide security has created a security vacuum (Baker 2006:56), and as a result, an array of policing actors has arisen that constitute a plural policing landscape (see Anderson, 2002; Adu-Mireku 2002; Aning 2006; Baker 2002; Baker 2004; Baker 2009).

A number of reasons underpin this reality. First, in a number of African states, public policing has never fully displaced other forms of indigenous policing systems throughout the post-colonial era (Turner 1955). The endurance of some of these indigenous policing groups has been driven partly by internal dynamics, including the flexibility of civilian policing groups, the way these groups understand and address security concerns, and their sensitivity to local justice and security which are concerned also with metaphysical and socio-cultural matters. Externally, the continued endurance of some civilian policing groups has in part been sustained by the rolling back of the state through structural adjustment programs.

This chapter argues that the establishment of a Watch Dog group in the poor urban neighbourhood of Nima in Accra was in part a self-initiated, rather than police-driven, response to appropriately address local security needs. It has created the space and

opportunity for ordinary people to address their own security and justice needs. The chapter brings an additional argument to existing literature on civilian policing actors by showing not only the changing dynamics and phases that such groups inevitably undergo, but also, importantly, the space that the Watch Dog group creates to incorporate local views of what security and justice means to different people and how these can be properly addressed.

The chapter begins with an outline of Nima's demography and a brief explanation of local notions of security and justice. This is followed by a description of the Watch Dog, its *raison d'être*, operations, recruitment processes, motivations, and its engagement with the public police and other state institutions. The last section discusses the two key challenges that confront the Watch Dog: The interference of politicians and drug barons. It concludes by making a short comparison with high-income areas of Accra, arguing that closer relations to politicians and greater wealth allow them to use a wider range of security options. In turn, in these neighbourhoods, Watch Dogs have not been as successful.

Security and justice in Nima

Nima is adulterated word of *Nee Mann* which means Nee's Town in the Ga language. It is a low income and high density population suburb of Accra and lies about 5 kilometres from the Central Business District. According to informal discussions with senior police officers, Nima Police Division has one of the highest rates of crimes in Ghana, and most residents of Accra perceive it as such.

Nima started building its own identity as a migrant community in the 1940s as a result of the fast urbanisation of Accra. Some of its earlier settlers were families of soldiers of the Royal West African Frontier Force in Accra who were asked by the British Colonial authorities to leave the military camp due to security concerns during World War II. Interestingly, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, residents of Nima took up part of their own security. In an interview with the father of the president of Watch Dog under scrutiny in this study, Imam Amadu Ibrahim pointed out that community policing in Nima was not a novelty.

Ibrahim revealed that after the war, the youth of Nima constituted a self-policing group which patrolled the community at night. Again in the late 1990s and early 2000s, another sub-state policing group emerged in Nima called *Isakaba*. This group was named after a group in Nigeria that had been popularized in certain communities in Ghana through a movie called

Isakaba. In Nigeria and Nima, *Isakaba* was seen as an advocate for the poor against the powerful in society, corruption and other perceived anti-social behaviour. Whereas one group thinks the group has Islamic inspirations others regard it as a purely social movement for the poor.

Nima is a predominantly Muslim community, but most Ghanaian ethnic groups are represented. A substantial number of its residents are from the three northern regions of Ghana: Northern, Upper East and Upper West. In addition, there are other West Africans. A notable aspect of identity and nationality in the neighbourhood is that a number of residents claim that they are both Ghanaians and citizens of other West African states. This dual nationality has no legal basis, but most residents wish to stay attached to their ancestral heritage as part of their identity.

Local notions of security and justice among most of Nima's residents incorporate spiritual and physical dimensions and emphasize the connection between them. To a large extent, the spiritual world influences and shapes the physical. As a result, one needs to be spiritually sensitive and fortified in order to respond appropriately to physical security and justice needs. This view is not unique to Nima residents. It resonates with the belief among many Africans that there is a causal relationship between the metaphysical and physical world, which shapes how crime and justice can be addressed.

In the case of Nima, it is clear that there is a widely held view among residents that criminals, particularly armed robbers, have strong spiritual support and to successfully arrest and prosecute them demands spiritual buy-in. In pointing to this different views about security and justice and how it can be accessed, Brogden (2005:88) writes 'the lessons from the law and development movement was that local legal structure must take into account indigenous practices and forms of legitimacy, no matter how repugnant to liberal western jurist'.

The origin and changes of the Watch Dog

In the words of a resident of Nima: 'We don't have anywhere to go; Nima is like our home land'.² This quote describes one of the key motivations of creating, maintaining, and sustaining the Watch Dog group that operates in Nima West. It is a sub-state policing group and the community policing unit of the Ghana Police Service has for a long time considered it to be the best Watch Dog in the country.³

By most standards, Watch Dog is a vigilante group, known for being brutal, untrained, on the boundary of criminality, and of having a myopic vision (Abraham 1987; Buur and Jensen 2004; Sen and Pratten 2007). These notions are common stereotypes for low-income communities that are suspected to nurture and harbour criminals. However, for groups like the Watch Dog there are practical reasons why they exist. As one member of the group indicated: Before it was established ‘there was no night or day in Nima: crimes that could only be committed at night elsewhere were carried out in the day’. Criminals acted with total disregard for the police.

The Watch Dog was formed by locals with no input from the public police in 2003. This was due to a heightened state of insecurity and the inability of the public police to appreciate and incorporate local security concerns into their operational plans. A sense of belonging is often shaped by and through state institutions (Loader 2006). However, the way that the public police has engaged in Nima sends a message about how the police is ‘often systematically oriented to maintaining dominant societal interest and values in ways that foster and reproduce insecurity among economically and socially disadvantaged groups’ (Loader 2006:211).

The search for security and justice alternatives results in the creation of the community policing group, which is not necessarily intended to take over the role of the state police but rather to respond more appropriately to local security and justice needs and concerns. These responses are designed to be sensitive to local notions of what security is and how it can be provided. Moreover, the initiative of forming the group was achieved by a strong sense of communal belonging and interdependence among Nima residents, with additional support from the diaspora.

In order to provide security based on local notions of security and justice, the first step was to put together a trusted body of indigenes. These are people who have a deep knowledge of the various criminal networks that operate in Nima. These are also people who act in the spirit of voluntarism and who desire to contribute to the safety and security of the community.

The group initially met with the public police and outlined their objectives which were to provide security for members of its community. The police then granted them the license to operate as part of its community policing scheme. Next, the group sought moral authority and legitimacy from the community’s members and leadership. To this end, they met

prominent chiefs, pastors, imams and other opinion leaders who gave their backing and support by signing the objectives of the group in a public ceremony. This was a public show of their approval, however, without legal effect. The Nima diaspora, particularly in the United States, later gave their strong support to the group by providing them with some logistical support.

The support and buy-in from various constituencies within and outside Nima gave the group moral authority to begin their operations. By going to the police and the chiefs the Watch Dog wanted to gain legitimacy at both state and community level. As such, they avoided the situation of the public police, which had state legitimacy but little local approval and credibility.

The name of the group has undergone three major changes since its establishment in 2003. These changes reflect lessons of the group that have shaped and influenced its response to local security needs. The group was first known as the Nima West Neighbourhood Watch Dog Group, but its name changed to the Nima Maamobi Neighbourhood Watch Dog Group. The reason for the name change was that although the initial focus and scope of the group's work was to protect lives and property in Nima West, the group soon realized that the networks of a number of criminals reached into other parts of Nima and Maamobi. To be more effective, the group started conducting some of its community policing duties in other parts of Nima and subsequently in Maamobi.

Later the group changed its name again to Nima West Counselling, Rehabilitation and Neighbourhood Watch Group. This change stemmed from the experience and desire of the group to prevent, reduce and tackle crime from a holistic perspective. According to the leadership, it became obvious during their operations that a large number of the criminals that they apprehended were minors who they considered to be victims rather than criminals. The group found that most of these minors were being exploited by criminals and lacked proper parental care.

The group therefore decided to help rehabilitate and counsel some of these minors on the dangers of drugs and crime. They also made efforts to rehabilitate those who were already on drugs and/or had been released from prison. These additional responsibilities were assumed by the group without regard to the fact that they had no training in social work. Instead, they use their local knowledge of how to rehabilitate drug addicts through, for example, counselling minors to stop and focus on personal development that can help them break out

of poverty. Formal education was regarded as key to this breakthrough and numerous activities were carried out to this end.

The different names of the Watch Dog reflect the phases that the civilian policing group has gone through. Over time, it came to see criminal behaviour as a symptom of deep-seated socioeconomic and historical factors, which had to be addressed accordingly. Indeed, the metamorphosis in name and responsibilities of the Nima Watch confirms the point that policing, as it is currently practiced globally, is too reactionary in its institutional responses and routines.

Recruitment procedure and the role of community members

Two procedures are employed by the Watch Dog to guide recruitment into its ranks: Those who join voluntarily and those who are identified by the group as well as chiefs and other community leaders. Those encouraged to join the Watch Dog are mostly young adults who are rehabilitated by the group or for whom the group provides an escape from criminal activity. The Watch Dog leaders rely heavily on their in-depth knowledge of residents in Nima and their familiarity with the area to undertake background checks of prospective members. In order to feel a sense of representation in the decision-making process within the group, some families also encourage young adult relatives to volunteer to join the group.

The recruitment process is rigorous and attention is paid to the detail of each applicant. The recruitment process has evolved over time based on previous experience. Generally, there is a slight difference in the recruitment process for those who are born, raised and live in Nima and Maamobi versus those who have lived most of their lives outside these communities.

If the applicant is born, raised and lives in one of the two areas, doing a background check takes approximately a week. The leadership of the group will ask Watch Dog members who are peers of the applicant to do the background check in the home of the potential member, ask about his or her behaviour at home, in school or madrasa/makaranta, etc. They will also seek the views of community members and elders regarding the person's respect for parents, elders, companions and other social and religious indicators and criteria to judge a good and well-behaved person. In a closely knit community like Nima, these are reliable sources for gathering information and intelligence about a person.

As such, the involvement of residents in their own security begins at the stage of recruitment. This is not the case regarding the public police. In addition, the zonal commander does the same checks using these and other criteria. Then when the youth and the zonal commander submit their reports the whole leadership crosschecks for consistency and difference. This strategy makes room for intergenerational differences in assessing an applicant given that the leaders are mostly in their late 40s or early 50s while other members commonly are under 35.

A number of direct and indirect participatory processes involved in forming the Watch Dog are not only pathways to enhancing community oversight. They also make the group democratic and strengthen trust between the residents of Nima and the group, making it easier for people to volunteer information about criminals without fear of being exposed. In addition, the phase of conducting background checks constitutes an entry point and platform of collaboration between the Watch Dog and the police and prevents criminals from joining the group.

Command structure and the spiritual foundation of policing

The Watch Dog is designed to maximise efficient use of its resources and relationship with the public police. They have accomplished their set objectives through strong strategic, operational and tactical coordination as well as reliance on local knowledge of members and moral authority from prominent and ordinary residents. The leadership generally consists of elected members, although their deputies and two others officers are not. At the top is an Executive Council, which is headed by a President who also leads general operations. Other members of the Executive Council include a Vice-President, Operations Coordinator/Commander, Assistant Coordinator/Commander and Secretary.

The leadership, especially the very top, is chosen/elected based on local concepts of security. These people are believed to have strong spiritual powers to rally members and to protect them. The president of the Nima Watch Dog is the son of a former Imam of Nima (Imam Amadu Ibrahim) who was the chief Imam of a prominent mosque (Kardo Mosque) for 70 years. Consequently, it is believed that the Imam who had deep knowledge of the Qur'an spiritually fortified his sons, including the president of the group. Fighting them would equal fighting strong spiritual powers. Furthermore, the president belongs to a very large family known as Kardo, which provides him with a wide social network that gives him legitimacy,

perceived spiritual powers and support. Thus, even though elections are held to form the group, what informs and influences that process involves local views on how security can be provided and maintained, and by whom.

The elected officials get to choose their own deputies on the basis of whom they trust. In addition, the porter and treasure are also not elected. Together, these two groups are the core of the Watch Dog that liaises with the state security apparatus to discuss issues of cooperation and coordination. The next tier is made up of the field or zonal commanders. The rationale for the creation of the zones is primarily to ensure operational and tactical efficiency. At the bottom of the organizational structure are field operatives and administrative support staff.

At certain times of the Watch Dog's activities, the field operatives were over 100. This made it one of the biggest sub-state policing groups in terms of numbers and influence in Ghana. One striking characteristic of Watch Dog members is their contextual knowledge of criminal psychology in the Nima context, which they use to prevent and detect crime. Similarly, as noted above, the link between the spiritual and physical is strong in this regard. The leader of the Watch Dog explained that some criminals perform spiritual rituals at midnight, prior to embarking on criminal activities. For instance, some criminals slaughter ducks, dogs, chickens and drain the blood unto their deities and smear the rest of the blood on their body before going out to execute their criminal plans. Others wear rings and spiritual ornaments like talismans for the same purpose.

These rituals and ornaments are believed to hold strong spiritual powers that protect criminals from arrests, gunshots, bladed weapons, successful prosecution and conviction. Furthermore, it is believed among members of the Watch Dog and most residents in Nima that some of the charms can make one disappear. Indeed, in some instances, they have the ability to keep the distance between a criminal and his or her pursuers, regardless of whether the latter are faster than the former. In other words, criminals will always elude arrest and successful prosecution with the aid of spiritual powers.

Against this background, members of the group and some residents believe that when a suspected criminal has been arrested, it is necessary to pay special attention to finding and destroying any charms, amulets or deities that the suspects may hide. If not, the suspect will be released from police custody without proper investigation and state prosecutors will not be interested in pursuing the case due to the spiritual manipulation. In other instances, the

criminal may be sent to court, but once his or her spiritual ornaments are intact, it can be activated and directed to free the suspect.

The leadership of the group used the arrest of a notorious armed robber to point to the reality of direct links between the spiritual and physical world. The criminal, who had been wanted by the public police, but remained on the loose, was finally arrested in a joint operation between the group and the public police. When the robber was arrested he showed no sign of remorse, fear or concern. However, he screamed when he saw that members of the Watch Dog found and destroyed his charms and other spiritual ornaments. For the members of the group, the criminal screamed because he knew that his conviction had been secured (and freedom lost) once the charms were destroyed. The armed robber was convicted a few weeks later.

The leadership of the group argues that their success in the arrest and conviction of criminals is due to a number of reasons. First, the Watch Dog holds deep local knowledge of how criminals operate, particularly how they obtain spiritual support. Second, the ability to use their spiritual understanding complements efforts of the public police to detect the criminal. Third, most residents of Nima have confidence in the group partly because they trust that the group fully understands all dimensions of insecurity. How to appropriately deal with this insecurity accounts for their success. In this respect, Nima residents believe they share a common view on how security and justice should be provided, which in turn helps to build trust and confidence among the group and residents.

Furthermore, the leadership of the group indicates that some of them also are spiritually fortified against the charms of the criminals. They have charms and amulets which are more powerful than those of the criminals and that make it relatively easier for them to fight the criminals. One of the leaders pointed out that during most of their dangerous operations to arrest armed robbers those among them who are spiritually fortified transfer some of their spiritual powers to other members of the group. They transfer the powers by holding hands in a circle, whilst reciting certain words. At times the transfer is done in silence.

The role of the Watch Dog in providing security and justice, including their use of spiritual power, challenges the western understanding that a supreme constitution is one of the main features of a state. Nima points to the existence of plural legal regimes and justice systems, which operate even in stable democracies like Ghana. The partly spiritual approach that the Watch Dog adopts as it combats crime in Nima has contributed to the legitimacy and

acceptance of the group among its residents and beyond. This makes the group more sensitive to local notions of justice and security, which in part contributes to its wide acceptance and credibility.

In Nima, security and justice are strictly speaking not only related to the presence of the public police, but as much to the processes whereby security can be accessed. This means that a strong emphasis is put on the spiritual dimension safety and order-making. The Watch Dog creates a space that enhances local participation in security and justice sector governance at the micro level. They make room for often marginalized citizens to have a say in how their security is prioritised and addressed. In turn, this space creates the possibility of strong oversight by Nima residents over how security at the local level is governed, a role which can hardly be accomplished with respect to the state police.

Operations and tactical discipline of the Watch Dog

To understand the practical discipline of the Watch Dog and its effectiveness as compared to the public police one has to understand the architectural layout of Nima. The housing and road layout is complex and confusing to non-residents. The houses are located very closely to one another and most of them do not have the high residential fences or walls that are found in middle-income housing areas. As such, the area is closely knit by virtue of its geographical and architectural layout, which in turn facilitates interaction.

Foot patrol is the best way to provide security at night in Nima, and the Watch Dog embarks on patrols by foot and motor bike to assess the (potential) hideout of criminals. This way of operating is part of the strength of the Watch Dog as the group knows the terrain in which it operates. It has been adapted to ease and facilitate their operations and to make optimal use of individual expertise of the group's members. So, when they embark on an operation based generally on tip-offs from locals, the initial standard operation procedure is to call the zonal commander or leader in charge of the area where the crime is taking place or is about to take place to do a recognizance and report to the operating centre of the Watch Dog. If the problem can be solved by the zonal commander and his team, they deal with it and then report to the operating centre. When the situation proves too challenging to handle for the team in that zone, it requests backup from other zones. If a suspect is arrested, the person is sent to the group's headquarters, which is an office rented and paid for by the leader of the

group, and then to the police station. The time between when a suspected criminal is arrested and handed over to the police varies between 30 minutes and two hours, depending on the nature of the crime and the attitude of the suspect.

When a suspect is interrogated by members of the group, the kinds of techniques used depend on whether the suspect is considered to cooperate or not. At their headquarters a combination of techniques are used, which includes verbal questioning, at times slaps and corporal punishment, pleads and appeals for the criminal to cooperate, e.g. by pointing out other members of the gang. Interrogation techniques often reflect local notions of how security and justice might be accessed. In such cases, the use of reasonable force against suspects, and at what stage of the interrogation process what kind and intensity of force may be used, is evident to group members and members of the community – but may be uncomfortable to outsiders.

It appears that as the Watch Dog has increased engagement with the public police, their views on some aspects of their operations have changed, for instance, on who has the right to use force and what the limitations of their powers are. In other words, the notions of security and justice are not necessarily static, but evolve and are negotiable, although in some areas, like Watch Dog beliefs in the supernatural, belief systems remain fairly constant.

The availability of cell phones has become critical in Watch Dog operations as it enhances their ability to communicate vital information and also to mobilize quickly. Various members of the Watch Dog attested to the fact that without the availability of relatively cheap cell phones they would be less successful in their operations. For the Watch Dog, communication has been key in their planning and execution of operations. Accordingly, members have more than one phone number in order to take advantage of the cheaper rates and easy communications between numbers operated by the same network (telephone company).

On justice, the Watch Dog has settled numerous cases such as debt collection, marital problems and disagreements, deviant behaviour of minors, and so forth. They are able to carry out these services because, first, they are easily approachable by locals and also use a combination of local languages, dialogue, persuasion and force when needed. Second, they understand local notions of justice and security, and, third, unlike fees and bribes charged by some chiefs and public police officers, they do not charge fees for their services. Fourthly, cases are not unnecessarily adjourned and, fifthly, the Watch Dog is widely respected and therefore has substantial legitimacy and moral authority in Nima.

Finally, unlike the state-sanctioned courts, the Watch Dog does not use intimidating procedures and legal jargon, which frustrate ordinary citizens who have their cases tried in the formal justice sector. They do not unnecessarily adjourn cases. In one instance, the Watch Dogs settled a case of debt of about \$10,000 between two business partners and after the case had been settled no money was paid to the Watch Dog. They also punish, including corporal punishment, what the community sees as deviant behaviour; like children who do not go home for days, but stay at internet cafes to commit advance fee fraud (known as 419), premarital sex, disrespect of elders, not going to school and similar social and civil issues.

Motivation and survival of the Watch Dog: Community ties

The services offered by the Watch Dog are purely voluntary and members do not get any financial remuneration despite the high risk of their operations. Criminals who have been convicted and return to Nima pose a threat to members who helped in their arrest and conviction. In two extreme cases, wives of some of the field commanders were physically assaulted or threatened. The members of the Watch Dog had no insurance and relied on members' voluntary contributions to cater for injuries sustained during the course of their work. At the time of writing, there have not been any direct work-related deaths although the Watch Dog has confronted armed robbers on countless occasions. The leadership of the Watch Dog believes that they are spiritually fortified, which protects them and other members who go on foot patrols against armed robberies. The Watch Dog has also received major moral and logistical support from the Nima diaspora particular those living in New York, United States.

However, to fully understand the rationale and motive that drive the Watch Dog, it is important to know a bit more about the residents of Nima. Nima is a migrant community and predominantly Muslim. The second-largest religious group is Christian. This is not unique to Ghana but a general characteristic of West Africa. There are hardly any conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Nima. The chairman of the group traces his decent directly to the first settlers of Nima, but the exact date of its establishment is not known. As indicated above, his father was a prominent Imam who held the first Islamic Gum'ah prayers in Nima. These Gum'ah prayers were the second to be held in Accra altogether. Although the leader of the Watch Dog traces his descendants to Mali, he sees himself as a Ghanaian and Nima as his

hometown. But to the average Ghanaian, no one comes from Nima, since it is just an urban settlement.

For the Watch Dog leader, and many others, this feeling of being a descendant of a migrant who was a chief Imam of the community, and a person whose forefathers co-founded Nima, creates a deep sense of ‘patriotism’ and duty toward Nima. In addition, this background is a source of legitimacy that allows the Watch Dog leader to head the group that provides security and justice within the community. It appears that outsiders marvel at the degree of bonding between members of Nima and the community. For members of the group, Nima is their homeland and they will protect it with all their resources, even if their lives are at stake.

Apart from being a migrant community, almost seven out of every ten residents are born in Nima and live there, and speak Hausa no matter their religious and ethnic background. Hausa is the *Lingua Franca*. Consequently, anybody who speaks Hausa becomes part of that community. Again, one’s ability to speak Hausa language is a strong basis of being regarded and accepted as a member of the community. In other words, the local worldview of belonging is also assessed by the language one speaks. Within the Watch Dog group, Hausa is the main means of communication, solidarity and bonding. Despite the strong influence of Hausa in the socioeconomic lives of most residents of Nima, Hausa is not a Ghanaian language but originates from Northern Nigeria. However, it is widely spoken within Muslim communities in Ghana.⁴ The ability of the group to speak Hausa gives them an added advantage over the public police in fighting crime in Nima and Maamobi.

Relations with the public police and other state institutions

The relationship between the Community Policing Unit of the Ghana Police Service and the Nima Watch Dog has over the years been cordial, which could be attributed to the orientation of the personnel of this unit. In fact the Watch Dog has been a flagship of the Ghana Police Service Community Policing Scheme. The service has given it a number of awards.

The relationship between the Watch Dog and the Nima police division has largely been shaped by the attitude, understanding and appreciation of the role of the Watch Dog by the Divisional Police Commanders.⁵ This has resulted in shifting periods of smooth and strained engagements. The leadership of the Watch Dog emphasises that the relationship has gone through two major phases. The first was characterized by strong cooperation, which peaked

at around December 2008, followed by a period of tension, mistrust, low morale among members and the Watch Dog's subsequent near collapse (since mid-2010).

From its inception in 2003 until December 2008, the then Divisional Police Commander appeared to understand the practical challenges and the limitations of the police as the prime provider of security. The Watch Dog was thus actively encouraged to operate in Nima and to complement the efforts of the public police. This seems to have been a win-win situation, where the police hardly ever interfered with the work of the Watch Dog.

This phase saw strong cooperation and joint operations between the police and the Watch Dog. Several hardened criminals who had earlier 'eluded' the police were arrested and no-go-zones created by the criminals were dismantled. Security was established, which was not the case before the Watch Dog existed. Indeed, the National Headquarters of the Ghana Police Service gave two awards to the Watch Dog for fighting crime effectively and working with the police to this end.

For the police, there was no conflict between their notions of security and those of the Watch Dog as long as crime was tackled and the media, public and police were not worried about the *modus operandi* of the Watch Dog.

Relationship during the second phase (June 2010 until the time of writing) has been characterized by tension, mistrust and virtually no cooperation between the Watch Dog and the police. The fractured relationship undermined the effectiveness and enthusiasm of members of the Watch Dog to combat crime. What is not clear is whether the low morale within the Watch Dog and the mistrust that has developed between the Watch Dog and the police is a result of the curtailment of the Watch Dog's power and authority by the new Divisional Commander or something else (e.g., lack of funds). From the perspective of Watch Dog members, the new Divisional Commander has made it clear that while the Watch Dog could embark on operations without prior police consent under the former Divisional Commander, this is no longer tolerated. This directive, in the view of the members, is designed to undermine their enthusiasm to combat crime and in so doing please some politicians who wish to stop the growing influence of the group.

Another reason why the relationship between the police and the group is strained is that a new police directive requires permission from the police to undertake operations. However, the element of surprise has been one of the Watch Dog's vital weapons, which underpinned

their success during the first phase. Having to wait for permission from the police to begin an operation slows down their ability to respond to criminal activity efficiently. For the group's members the slow response of the police to crime is a major contributing factor to the credibility crisis that the Ghana Police Service is experiencing. Therefore, the Watch Dog does not want to undermine the trust that the locals have in them by delays in responding to crime. They assert that, all too often, they have been able to prevent and arrest suspected criminals because of their surprise and swift response to (potentially) criminal activities.

In addition, they are also able to identify and destroy spiritual powers of criminals. Because of the trust that community members have in them, they have easy access to vital information which has been extremely helpful in their operations. Their response time is far better and swifter than the police and this partly explains why, in most cases, they have dealt with crime effectively before the police arrive.

Some residents even suspect that some police personnel collude with the criminals and if prior permission is needed, individual police officers could jeopardise Watch Dog operations by tipping off suspected criminals. When the Watch Dog started arresting drug peddlers, some drug dealers sent a delegation to them to negotiate some terms for peaceful co-habitation.

This meant that the Watch Dog will not operate where the drug peddlers operate and in return, the dealers were prepared to pay a monthly amount to the Watch Dog. The Watch Dog members refused the offer. With this and other cases where suspects had been released by the police under suspicious circumstances, some locals suspect that the police can even tip off criminals when the group seeks its prior approval before operations. This kind of police protection of criminals happens at the same time as the police, on other occasions, try to take credit for the arrest of tough criminals that have in fact been apprehended by the Watch Dog alone. What this points to more broadly is that the relationship between the police and the Watch Dog is characterised by both collaboration and competition.

With this strained relationship, the group has decided not to confront the police. Instead, they have withdrawn their services, expecting that criminal activity will rise significantly, which in turn will force the state police to call upon the Watch Dog. Under these circumstances, the Watch Dog will negotiate with the police from a position of authority. However, in discussions with junior and senior police personnel, it became apparent that different police officers have different views on what the roles, responsibilities and powers of such groups should be. This lack of clarity affects the different types of relationship that police personnel

have with groups such as the Watch Dog, and also creates the space for politicians to manipulate and define such relationship based on the politicians' overt and covert political interest. The lack of clarity regarding the nature of the relationship between the public police and such groups on the one hand and the boundaries of the powers of community policing groups on the other hand, have been noted elsewhere (Ruteere and Pommerolle 2003; . Benit-Gbaffou 2008). For instance, Benit-Gbaffou (2008:95) notes that in post-apartheid South Africa: 'The line between what communities are entitled to do and what they should hand over to the police is very blurred, even more so if norms of social order vary in space and time'.

Apart from the state police, other state institutions also make use of the Watch Dog. For instance, the Ayawaso East Metropolitan Assembly has requested the Watch Dog to provide its staff with security when serving summons. Prior to this request, the Metropolitan workers could hardly serve summons to those who were violating the Metro Laws regarding unauthorized buildings, selling close on the main road in Nima, rearing cattle and livestock in urban areas, etc. Government workers were often assaulted physically and verbally when they attempted to carry out their lawful duties. The Watch Dog has also helped the Ghana Water Company to identify and arrest those who install illegal water pumps in their homes to avoid paying water bills.⁶ The critical role that the Watch Dog has played for these state institutions seems to indicate a reversal of roles or positions of authority in the sense that the statutory bodies and the police rely on the service of a sub-state policing group for security and protection.

Core Challenges: Politicians and drug barons

Key challenges, apart from low morale engendered as a response to police attitudes, come from politicians and drug dealers or barons.

Politicians seem to either want to manipulate the group or undermine their operations. Indeed, in the run-up to the last two general elections in 2008 and 2012, the leadership of the Watch Dog claims that the two major political parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), sought to convince them to be affiliated with them, but the Watch Dog declined. What is not too clear is why the group flourished and expanded during the era of the NPP, while its powers waned under the NDC. What is

instructive is that just after the NDC was declared as winners of the 2008 elections some youth in Nima, regarded by some residents as criminals and deviant youths, celebrated in the streets of Nima and said that the election result meant the end of the Watch Dog (with respect to the leadership of the group, their membership cuts across the various political parties, religious groups and ethnic groups).

During elections, power disputes between the Watch Dog and the state also intensified as politicians from the incumbent party often tried to use the police to stop the Watch Dog from clamping down on hawkers. This is ambivalent, however, because at the same time the politicians want the Watch Dog to fight criminals so that the politicians can take credit for dealing with crimes. Thus, the relationship between the Watch Dog, the state, and national politicians is not static, but changes according to major national events and political changes, particularly evident during general elections.

The strong role played by drug barons in Nima also challenges the work of the Watch Dog. At times this merges with the actions of the police and the interests of politicians. For instance, there were numerous occasions where it appeared that politicians had pressured the police to refrain from prosecuting suspects of drug dealing (or as in the Ghanaian parlance ‘make the case die’). This became apparent when the Watch Dog arrested peddlers, who the police had not arrested for a very long time at particular locations in Maamobi. In the words of one of the Watch Dog leaders: ‘My friend, we have fought armed robbers and other criminals but none of them are as dangerous as drug barons. They have a very extensive network that reaches the top of society and power’.

The drug dealers – or barons – seem to have instilled some fear in the leadership of the Watch Dog. A leader of the group hinted that some drug dealers, whose peddlers they had arrested, have started to make up lies about the Watch Dog, and link some of its members to acts of armed robbery. Also the Watch Dog has not been immune to attacks. In fact one of the greatest challenges to the Watch Dog happened on 15 November 2011 when its president and general commander (‘Dr’ Avalon) were injured by suspected criminals. This attack demystified their personalities and spiritual charisma as people who had been spiritually fortified to protect them from injury. This case severely tested the Watch Dog’s strength and position vis-à-vis criminal networks.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the strategies that a low income and densely populated migrant community like Nima adopts to provide for their own security and justice needs. By setting up the Watch Dogs, Nima has designed a strategy that is sensitive to local views on security and justice. They incorporate spiritual and physical elements into the service they deliver, and emphasize the connection between the two. In turn, when the Watch Dogs engage with the state, their strategy and sensitivity to local notions of security and justice is not necessarily changed. However, when the group thinks its trust and confidence will be undermined by state directives, it withdraws in the hope that the state will call on the assistance of its members. In sum, a densely populated community like Nima relies heavily on its own initiative, including local residents and resources as well as a strong sense of community and innovations in addressing its security and justice needs.

If we look at Accra in general there is a wide variety of security arrangements, and not all areas have successful Watch Dogs and political connections play a significant role in this regard. In high-income areas such as North Legon, residents are strongly connected to political parties and other socioeconomic networks. This makes it relatively easier to access state resources, including services by the public police. Private security is also prevalent, which includes the employment of young men from poor communities to undertake physically dangerous night patrols. Thus, in North Legon not a single person who goes on foot patrol is a resident of the neighbourhood.

In short, where members of a community have strong links with a political party or the public police they, and the communities they represent, are likely to be regarded as a priority area of the Ghana Police Service. Because this is not the case for the low-income neighbourhood of Nima, its residents have had to rely on local pro-activeness and self-designed and sensitive methods to meet their justice and security needs. In Nima, one is therefore tempted to conclude that there is an inverse relationship between the wealth of a community or the lack of it and the strength and success of its Watch Dog. The lack of presence and sensitivity of the public police offers a space for low income communities to create other platforms to address their wider security and justice needs based on local perceptions and beliefs.

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¹ The data for this paper was mainly gathered over a period of three years in Nima through (i) participant observation, (ii) focus group discussions (iii) indepth interviews in the study areas. In addition, one of the authors spent time as a volunteer administrative assistant with the Nima [Wwatch_Ddog](#) which exposed him to the structure and modus operandi of the group.

² [This quote and all other quotes in the text though are the authors' own translations from Ga.](#)

³ Interview with a police officer (who does not want to be mentioned) at the headquarters of the Community Policing Section of the Ghana Police Service, 30th August 2013, Accra Ghana. This officer had worked in this section since its inception.

⁴ The reason is partly because some of those who introduced (sometimes by default) Islam into current day Ghana were Hausa itinerant traders.

⁵At the top of the police structure is the Inspector General of Police (IGP), followed by the Regional, Divisional and District Police Commanders. Below the district is the police service and post respectively. There are currently 11 police regions,

⁶ These people connect water pumps (some as strong as 5 horse power) under their beds in their bedrooms or under corn mill machines (to avoid detection by sound). They then siphon the water meant for the area into their reservoir tanks which they in turn sell (at high prices) to community members (who are denied access to the water pumped by the water company).