

# The Perception of The Police by The Poor: A Case Study of Four Communities in Oyo State - Nigeria

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## Abstract

The Nigerian Police force is the primary law enforcement agency in Nigeria. It is the first contact that a person has with the criminal justice system. The members of the police force perform so many functions and they deal closely with the people. There is a legal adage which says that "The law is no respecter of persons". Therefore, during the interaction of the police with the members of the public, all persons are expected to be treated equally without regard to sex, age, ethnic group, educational qualification or wealth.

Furthermore, to enhance the relationship between members of the public and the police, the police coined an expression that "police is your friend". The police come into frequent contact with certain classes of people than others in the performance of certain duties. The poor fall into this class as they come into friction with the police often. For mutual understanding between the police and the public, it is pertinent to examine the truth of this police saying from the perspective of the poor. Oyo State is one of the thirty-six States in Nigeria. Being a large State, this study is limited to a few communities in Oyo State, where the poor are situated. The poor are defined for the purposes of this paper and are divided into the rural and urban areas.

This paper highlights the perception of the police by the poor. The poor perceives the police as partial, corrupt, time wasters, unorganised, and inefficient. The problems of the Police Force are examined. The police stated some of these problems to include manpower problems, logistic problems, poor image of the police by the society, lack of funds and poor salary.

This paper suggest that there is need for immediate and constant recruitment into the police force to beef up manpower, a review of the present salary structure and sufficient motivation for members of the Police force, provision of modern equipment and adequate office accommodation and materials.

## **Introduction**

The Nigerian Police Force (the force) is the primary law enforcement agency in the country. It is a vital arm of the public service for maintaining law and order, and it represents the first contact with the criminal justice system. Presently, there is only one police force in Nigeria established under the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria<sup>1</sup> and The Police Act<sup>2</sup>. The functions of the Police Force are clearly spelt out in the Police Act. They include: the prevention and detection of crimes, apprehension or arrest of offenders, maintenance of law and orders, protection of lives and property, due enforcement of all laws and regulations with which they are directly charged, and the performance of such military duties within and without Nigeria as may be required or directed by the appropriate authority.<sup>3</sup>

From these functions, it is apparent that the members of the Force, deal closely with the people. If the members of the Force are to carry out such functions efficiently, they should interact with all classes of people in the society and such interaction should not be restricted to a particular class of people, but should cut across different classes of people without regard to the sex, age, ethnic origin, educational qualification or wealth.

There is a legal maxim that says "The law is no respecter of persons" and a police saying that "the police is your friend". The application of this legal maxim and the police saying to the daily interaction of the police with members of the public is a crucial matter that is examined in this paper. In interacting with the people, the members of the police force come into frequent contact with certain classes of people than with others. It is important to note that the contact depends on the type of function being carried out. According to Oseni<sup>4</sup>, the police come into contact, more with the poor than the rich. If the poor constitute a larger percentage of those that come into frequent contact with the police, it is important to examine the relationship between them and this will be examined from the perspective of the poor.

This paper looks at the structure and functions of the Police force, it highlights the perception of the police by the poor, and examines the problems facing the poor and the Police force. Finally, suggestions on how to improve the Police force and enhance the relationship between the poor and the police are given.

## **The Structure and Functions of the Nigeria Police Force**

Over the years, the structure of the Police Force has changed considerably. The history of the force shows that before the advent of the colonial administration, there existed traditional and local law enforcement agencies<sup>5</sup>. Such agencies operated under the control of traditional rulers, and was essentially, to correct breaches of traditional laws and rules. Needless to say, that enforcement of law was only one of the many duties of these local law enforcement agencies. This structure further changed in the colonial period from mainly enforcement of laws to protection of the colonial masters. The members of the Force at that time were illiterates without formal training and were later accused of corruption<sup>6</sup>.

The changes in the Nigerian constitution no doubt, changed the structure of the Police Force. The 1979 Nigerian constitution provides for the first time, that there shall exist no other Police Force than the Nigeria Police Force<sup>7</sup>. The implication of this provision, is that under the Police Act<sup>8</sup>, there is only one police force unlike when each region was having its own police before 1967.

The functions of the Nigeria Police are vital and indispensable in any society. Unlike the Nigerian Armed Forces, the Police deal directly with the people in the society, except in extra-ordinary situations where other units like the military may be called in. Such extra-ordinary situation arises where the nature of equipment of the Police are inadequate to put the situation under control.

The functions of the police have changed over the years. Between the 1930 and 1960, the Police performed administrative duties. During the period, the Northern police force personnel were developed to destroy locust in Lokoja, and in Kano to round up cattle for rinderpest inoculation. They were also performing the duties of the sheriffs and fire fighting.<sup>9</sup>

In the mid-sixties, the functions of the police were redefined and the fundamental duties were the maintenance of law and order, protection of lives and properties, assisting the Armed Forces in liberated areas when there is war etc. In the 1979 Constitution, it is provided that the duties of the Police would be as conferred upon them by law. Pursuant to this provision, the general functions of the force are enumerated in Section 4 of the Police Act.

The presence of members of the Police are sometimes necessary at rallies, public meetings, polling centres and other places where there may be a break-down of law and order to forestall such a break down of law and order.

### **Conceptual Clarification and Scope**

Some concepts are used in this paper and should be clarified. The poor are underfined statistically in Nigeria<sup>10</sup>. The term "poor" according to Scott, is relative, and it is not possible to determine poverty lines in absolute terms.<sup>11</sup> In this paper, it is not intended, to give a concise definition of the term "poor" or to engage in measuring poverty. However, an attempt is made to clarify the term "poor" in the context in which it is used in this paper. The term is looked at from a broad perspective of poverty based on certain factors identified in the locality in which such persons classified as poor are found. In that context poverty is considered in terms of living conditions, public facilities or services. Fadayomi stated that poverty is more rural than urban<sup>12</sup>. This paper examines in particular, the perception of the rural poor. To determine the rural poor, the factors used include material deprivation expressed in non-monetary terms, lack of public service,<sup>13</sup> which include lack of Portable water, lack of good roads, lack of electricity supply, lack of educational facilities and medical care, lack of vehicular and communication services and peasantry.

It is not only in the rural areas that the poor are found as they are also found in urban cities. Therefore, there are the rural poor and the urban poor. The urban poor

communities, do have, in certain respects, similar characteristics of rural poor communities, such as unplanned housing area, lack of formal sanitation and dirty environment, poor educational and health facilities and a very high population density.

All communities in Oyo State of Nigeria, cannot be covered by this paper. Therefore, four communities in the State were selected for the case-study. Out of the four communities, three are located in rural areas and the fourth is an urban area, chosen for comparison and to show the extent to which the locality in which the poor are based, affect their perception of the police. The four communities were selected from three different local government areas in Oyo State. The three rural communities are Ketepe and Ojoponde in Akinyele Local Government Area and Ayede in Egbeda Local Government Area. The urban community selected is Oke Foko community in Ibadan South-West Local Government. In the rural communities, all the villages resident there about seventy (70) in number in each village participated in this research work. In Oke-Foko, a relatively large urban community, only two compounds of fifty people each were involved in the study.

### **The Perception of the Police by The Poor**

There is an expression that "The police is your Friend". The truth of this statement, (from the perception of the poor) was doubted right at the inception of the discussion with the residents in the four different communities. Generally, there was the reluctance to talk about the police, but after some social interaction, the residents agreed to respond. According to one of them, the reluctance to talk can be summarised in vernacular thus "Oro Olopa Toto". Interpreted literally, to mean "Police related matters are better left undiscussed". In Ojoponde, the poorest of the three rural communities, a deeper resentment was shown for the police because residents did not want to talk, or hear or discuss issues about the police. In this village, their perception about the police is that the police are only dealing with criminals. They strongly held on to this view and rejected a suggestion put across to them that a police station should be constructed by the local government in the village. They claimed that they are peace loving people, although, they are poor but they would not like the police to live with them in the village. The perception of the police, by the poor is discussed under the subheadings below.

#### **Partial**

The police are perceived as being partial. The need arose to find out the relationship between poverty and the police interaction with the poor. They claimed that being poor places them at a disadvantage in their relationship with the police, and that this affects the way the police relate to and treat them. The police are said to treat the poor shabbily and this type of treatment is peculiar to the poor class alone. The rich it is said rarely have friction with the police; but rather (quoting one of the residents), "The rich settle their cases with the police with a phone call or business card". This

statement confirms Oseni's view that it is the poor that are in frequent brushes with the police. 14 Oseni, a former Assistant Commissioner of Police said, this fact is confirmed by a visit to the prisons and the calibre of persons behind the bars. He then asked a question "Where are the big men criminals"?

### **Corrupt**

Another general perception of the police, by the residents is that the police are corrupt and a poor man can never be right with the police. The poor man can only receive justice from a policeman if he can bribe his way through. They claimed that they know that bribery is an offence by that, it is the only way out when a person gets into the police net. As an alternative, a person who does not want to be involved in such a practice must avoid contact with the police, and a person who tries to assert any right with the police will be manhandled.

### **Time and Money Wasters**

the police are also seen as time wasters. Any interaction with the police either as a complainant or accused is a time wasting venture. A person may be worse off going to the police, because police matters drag over a long period. They claimed that they are peasants and local hunters who cannot afford the time that may be demanded by the police.

Apart from being time consuming, any involvement with the police is regarded as a wasteful venture. With their state of poverty, they said that any involvement with the police will involve their spending their meagre resources. They said that except in serious cases that cannot be settled internally, they prefer to settle issues amicably amongst themselves. In Oke-Poko, the urban community, a Local Association where issues are resolved was formed.

### **Unorganised**

Another perception of the police by the poor is that the police are not properly organized. In one of their experiences they went to report certain incidents at the police station, and were told to bring writing sheets to take down their statements because none was available in the station and were informed that the stations do not have vehicles or means of transportation. Invariably, a person may end up providing money for transportation for the police during investigation and, where the case would have to go to court, for the accused and the police escort.

### **Inefficient**

The police are said to be inefficient. Some issues are best tackled by other means than by going through the police. In Ayede Community, a personal experience was narrated. A few years back, some thieves stole some electric wires meant for the electrification project of the village. They were disappointed in the police because

though the thieves were caught with the stolen wires by the villagers and taken to the nearest police station, the thieves were later released and nothing more was heard from the police on the matter. They were of the opinion that the police had taken some money from the thieves and released them. This they attributed to the fact that they were a poor community that could not afford to bribe the police.

In the rural poor communities, the villagers did not agree with the expression that "the police is your friend", and vowed that none of their children would be allowed to enlist into the Police force.

Comparing the rural poor with the urban poor in Oke-Foko, so many similarities were discovered in their perceptions. However, one major difference is in the interaction with the police. According to them, their location in the city of Ibadan, and their different means of livelihood like driving, street trading and majority being artisans, make their frequent contact with the police inevitable and they are the target of the police facing unpleasant confrontation. The fact, that the urban poor cannot but interact with the police they claim to see the police as an arm of government that must be understood and cooperated with. This they do through the illegal means of giving bribe to pay their way through. This, the residents called "unreceipted fee".

The urban poor were not eager to join the force, but they did not totally rule over the idea.

Ojoponde the rural community had never had any interaction with the police, but they expressed the strongest rejection for the police force, which was as a result of observations and information received about the police.

### **Problems of the Nigeria Police Force**

The police is not without its own problems. The perception of the police by the poor may be attributed to some problems experienced in the force. These problems are highlighted to see the extent to which it has contributed to the way the poor perceive the police.

#### **Manpower Problem**

This is a glaring problem in the force. According to police sources, no recruitment exercise has been carried out in the rank and file in the last three years, though there is a constant fall in the number of members of the Police force due to retirement, dismissal and death while in service. According to the 1994 Nigeria Police Force Annual Report, in the Oyo State Police Command, there is a provision for a total of four thousand, one hundred and eighty-eight (4,188) police personnel. However, the actual strength according to the Report, is three thousand five hundred and ten (3,510) policemen. Out of the 3,510 policemen, a total of 3,395 of them were on ground.

Furthermore, according to police sources at the Oyo State Police Command as at the 22nd day of September 1995, the actual strength of the Police was 3,457 policemen. Comparing this number of 3,457 policemen in Oyo State with a

population of 3,488,789 people in Oyo State,<sup>15</sup> it is glaring that the ration falls short of the United Nations recommended ration of 1:400. This problem of manpower has been said to be the cause of the use of unnecessary violence by the police. An example of a case of unnecessary violence by a policeman was reported in one of the daily newspapers where a police sergeant drilled a Deputy Superintendent of Police at gun point and threatened that he would shoot him if he moved from the point where he told him to sit down on the bare floor at an illegal check point.<sup>16</sup>

### **Logistic Problems**

This is a serious problem with the Police Force. Inadequate transportation and communication facilities, office materials and equipment necessary for efficient work, constitute serious problems to the Police Force. According to a police spokesman, "the Nigerian Police went to Congo in the sixties and performed excellently. They went to Namibia in 1990, and out of twenty-five countries, the Nigerian Police was the best. What was the magic? They had equipment. Again our men went to Angola, out of the twenty of them that went, fifteen got letters of commendation. We trained them here but we have not given them the equipment<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, the Assistant Inspector General of Police in Zone 2, Lagos, said that mobility is very important in the performance of police duties, but this is a problem being faced by the Force.<sup>18</sup> The logistic problems have led to the development of certain trends in Nigeria. The recent trend is that individuals, organisations and communities embark on purchasing and donating vehicles, equipment, buildings, etc to the Force through the Police Community Relations Committees. These acts are patriotic and commendable but inadequate. Moreover, such acts have negative effects because they have the tendency of making the police lose control over persons or communities that make such donations. These donations are usually made by rich individuals and communities who do not fall into the category of the communities under this case study. Such individuals and communities that make such donations are those that are referred to by the poor communities as those that the police favour.

### **Poor Image**

This problem of the poor image of the Police is one of its greatest problems.<sup>19</sup> The Police in Nigeria is held in low esteem by members of the society. The Police represents the first contact with the legal system, but the image of its members is so poor and at the lowest ebb. There are so many factors that have contributed to the poor image. One important factor is corruption. According to the poor, the police can be manipulated by any member of the public who can give out money to them. They stated that every check point is a "toll gate". But the difference between this "toll gate" and the legally established toll gate is that the proceeds at the "toll gate" go into the pocket of the policemen without evidence of payment. Though checkpoints have been abolished in order to stop these corrupt practices, illegal checkpoints are still found everywhere in the country. Oyo State is not excluded. There was a twist in the

events recorded in Oyo State when a police sergeant drilled a Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) at an illegal road block. According to the report, captioned "Check Point Episode: Police Sergeant drilled DSP".<sup>20</sup> The DSP who was the Divisional Police Officer in charge of Agugu Police Station, Ibadan in Oyo State, was returning from his farm on his motor-cycle with some harvested cassava tubers when he was stopped at an illegal road block by the police sergeant, who accused the DSP of stealing the cassava tubers. All attempts by the DSP to explain his status in the Force and exonerate himself of the accusation of theft fell on deaf ears. He was ordered to sit on the bare floor for three hours before he was later released. It was further reported that on the orders of the Oyo State Commissioner of Police, the sergeant has been ordered to be disciplined.

The issue of corruption that has contributed to the dented image of the Police has been described as a national tragedy. According to Alhaji Mohammadu Gambo, former Inspector General of Police of Nigeria, corruption is a national tragedy because it hinges on a sense of betrayal and it touches the very core of public confidence and trust in the Police force.<sup>21</sup> The undisputed corrupt practices in the Police Force was one of the reasons why the anti-vice squad, formerly X-Squad, of the Force was established. It must be stated that it is no defence that a corruptible society breeds a corruptible police. The Police force should live above board.

Another factor that is responsible for the poor image of the Police in Nigeria, is the poor, unimpressive and shabby dressing appearance of most policemen in the junior cadre. Unfortunately, these are the members of the Police force that interact more frequently with the people. There is no doubt that a man's appearance speaks much about him. The Police Force are the worst dressed in comparison with the other units of the armed and paramilitary forces. The colour of the uniform is dull and unimpressive. Most of the times they have missing buttons or non-matching buttons, dusty boots, where such still exists, or gaping openings. Unfortunately, the same dressing pattern is not found amongst high ranking officers who sit in their offices and are better dressed. According to Okere, "what then can be expected of the police who lives under such frustrating condition who at the same time is expected by the society to stake his life in safe-guarding others lives and property."<sup>22</sup>

The level of education of the Nigerian Police personnel is another factor for the poor image. Literacy has a lot to do with the approach to duty and attitude to the public. The rank of a superior police officer does not determine his literacy level.<sup>23</sup> Oseni, stated that the Nigerian Police Force is an organisation where there are some officers of very high rank with no qualification than the uniform and ranks they wear, and who hardly can write their names. It is, therefore, not surprising that junior members of the Police Force hardly converse in the English language which does not portray a good image. The introduction of the Cadet Scheme where qualified professionals and graduates are employed into the Force have yielded results. This has brought about improvements in the middle tanks and the management cadre of the police with positive changes in the attitudes of such policemen to the members of the public and a more cordial relationship necessary for efficiency.



### **Problem of funding and Salary Structure**

There is no doubt that the services derived presently from the Police hinges on the level of performance of the Police force. Presently, the police are under-paid, and the Force is under-funded. Funding is an important aspect of any set-up, without which there cannot be smooth functioning. For police efficiency, it must be adequately funded to attract new enlistment proper functioning units, and to minimize corruption and apathy in the force due to poor pay.

In this paper, the poor see the policemen as extortioners.

### **Police Efforts in Redeeming its Image**

Steps are being taken by the police to redeem the poor image. Certain Unites are being establish to achieve this purpose. some of the steps include the following:

- (a) The Nigerian Police Force Public Relations Department, was established in 1964 for efficient administration of the police. It was established amongst other thins to correct erroneous impressions about them, bridge the gap between the public and the police, and keep the public informed about police activities. In furtherance of the objectives of this department so many committees were set up. The Police Students Relations Committee is a unit under this Department.

It is known that students are in constant friction with the police. A committee was set up where the police and the students can rub minds together on how to improve the relationship between them and avoid the common clashes which sometimes result in death. In addition, there is the Police Community Relations Committee where the police interact closely with members of the public. The Divisional Police Officer in charge of the area presides at a meeting of this committee on monthly basis. Representatives selected from the communities meet with the Divisional Police Officer (D.P.O.) and other Police Officers to discuss matters affecting the society and the police. At this forum, members of the public bring their complaints and grudges against the police and ideas that are erroneous are corrected and necessary actions are taken where possible. Furthermore, the members of the public that are in frequent friction with the police, such as mechanics, market women, road transporters, among others, have meetings with the police to bridge the gap between them.

- (b) The Cadet Scheme and the Anti-vice Squad, discussed above, are part of the efforts of the Nigerian Police Force to improve its services to the public.
- (c) Regulations are made pursuant to section 46 of the Police Act. The Regulations control the policy, organisation, administration and discipline in the force.

In the area of discipline, police officers are expected to submit to proper discipline. Therefore, several offences against indiscipline are provided in the Regulations (First Schedule).

It is quite unfortunate that some of the ills in the Police force as perceived by the poor are listed as offences against indiscipline in the First Schedule of the Police Regulations without complying with them.

## **Conclusion**

From the case study, the poor see the police as corrupt, incompetent, violent, time and money wasters and partial in citizens' treatment. However, a closer look at the Police reveals that there are internal problems that may account for such perception by the poor. The police are underpaid, overworked, ill-equipped, under-staffed and under-funded.

To remove the unpleasant stigma on the Nigerian Police force, the nation should be prepared to rebuild the Police Force. Urgent steps must be taken to give the Police force a befitting status, and the problems already identified by the poor and the police themselves must be addressed. It is suggested that immediate and constant recruitment into the Police force is necessary to beef-up manpower.

Furthermore, the salary structure of the police must be reviewed, and the salary package should be comparable with those of other units of the Armed Forces. The Police Force occupies a priority of place in any civilised society. The police personnel should be well paid to motivate others like professionals, graduates and honest members of the public to join the Police, minimize corrupt practices and improve the image of the Police Force.

In addition, for the members of the force to be motivated, fulfilled and efficient, sophisticated and modern equipment, vehicles, motor-cycles, adequate office equipment and materials and decent accommodation must be available for their use. It is suggested that the annual budget allocation of the Nigerian Police force be increased to enable the Force invest in the training of its officers to enhance their performance. The task facing the Nigerian Government in rebuilding a dignified and efficient police force is huge; but the burden of the police remains unchanged. With determination, the government, the members of the Police force and all Nigerians must play a part in ensuring that urgently, the Nigerian Police force is restored to a status befitting the nation.

## **Referees**

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