“Leh di Pipul dem Tok” (Let the People Talk) is the Krio title of a public opinion poll taken in Freetown, Sierra Leone in late 2001. It is part of a concerted effort by the Campaign for Good Governance, a community-based non-profit organization, to ensure that the political process now being put into place to maintain and strengthen the peace in that country is informed by the voice of the people. The civil war in Sierra Leone could arguably be said to have been caused by, or at least exacerbated by, an extreme gap in access to social and economic resources between Sierra Leone’s elite and the rest of its citizens. This discrepancy can be heard in casual conversations in Sierra Leone through references to “big men and small men.” Public opinion polls are one way to give the “small men” a voice and to guard against a continuation in their lack of access to resources.

As the causes of the civil war in Sierra Leone are many, so too are the myriad solutions that must be implemented to ensure a lasting peace. This essay focuses on the imperative to promote trust between the citizens of Sierra Leone and their police force as a basis for the creation of a civil society in which diverse members of society can peacefully coexist. Social justice requires that public institutions “do no harm” to the citizenry they are charged with serving. Further, it requires, when public agencies have harmed individuals or groups within the community, that they take action to ameliorate that harm. For the police to engage in the promotion of social justice, they must be committed to three crucial organizational tenets. First, they must engage in open and honest two-way communication with their constituents. Second, all police operations and activities must be fully transparent. And third, communication and transparency must lend support to an agency that is accountable to the citizens it serves.

Sierra Leone is a small country in northwestern Africa with a population of approximately five million citizens. According to recent World Health Organization statistics, adults in Sierra Leone can expect to live into their early to mid thirties while their children have an approximately 1 in 3 chance of dying before they reach the age of five. These figures put Sierra Leone at the bottom of the scale compared with other African nations. Diseases that have been eradicated from the majority of the globe continue in Sierra Leone, including dysentery, polio, and tuberculosis.

As is true in all conflicts, the history of the civil war in Sierra Leone is complex and far reaching. “Blood diamonds,” or conflict diamonds, are an easy, but
somewhat misleading, target when laying blame for the civil war. More accurately the primary cause is the fact that the rich natural resources in Sierra Leone, including diamonds, titanium ore, and bauxite, as well as the cash that they bring in, have traditionally been reserved for the benefit of the “big men.” The big men are the relatively small elite who ran the country from 1961, when Sierra Leone gained its independence from Great Britain, until 1991, when the civil war began.

During the intervening 30 years, the country was controlled by repressive dictatorships, first under Siaka Stevens and then by his handpicked successor Saidu Momoh. These political leaders, following a fairly typical African model, adopted a neo-patrimonial political system that is defined by Nicolas van de Walle as a government with a surface layer of modern public administrative elements along with a strong undercurrent of corruption. The regimes under these men existed to create wealth for themselves and their supporters (the All People’s Party), using international aid and loans to do so. This practice left approximately 80–90 percent of the population illiterate, living in poverty, and unable to meet their basic needs.

In 1991, under the banner of the “small men,” revolutionary forces—primarily those of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)—attacked villages in the southern and western regions of the country with the ostensible goal of ending the dictatorship and its corruption. The rebels sought to install a democratic system and create an opportunity for the proceeds from the natural resources of Sierra Leone to be used for the betterment of all its citizens. Yet as part of the opinion poll mentioned in the introduction to this essay, over 3,000 adult residents of Freetown were asked if they believed that the RUF were fighting for “positive change or for their own benefit.” Over 85 percent answered that they believed that the RUF were fighting for their own benefit.

For the next ten years, the country was embroiled in a destructive civil war characterized by unspeakable brutality and widespread human rights abuses against civilians. The war between the government forces and the RUF played out for the most part in the towns and villages of Sierra Leone, with civilians as the main targets and victims of the ensuing violence. Both sides fought using proxies—the RUF is known for having kidnapped children for use as combatants while the government utilized mercenaries and coopted tribal militias (Kamajors) as soldiers. Through all of this, diamond mines continued to be the overt battlegrounds, since whoever controlled them had control over the diamonds that could be sold to finance the war.

The effects of the civil war were far reaching. Approximately 50,000 people died as the result of the fighting, with thousands more victimized by human rights abuses including rape and mutilation. In addition, one-fifth of the country’s population was displaced. Within the country, many citizens moved to Freetown, the capital city, stressing its already limited infrastructure. Those who fled went to neighboring countries, mainly Liberia and Guinea.

A fragile peace came to Sierra Leone in July of 1999 when the Lome Peace Accord was signed. This agreement built on earlier conflict-ending negotiations completed as part of the Abidjan Peace Agreement of November 1996 and the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) Peace Plan of October 1997.
Unfortunately, the approval of the Lome Accord did not end the violence in Sierra Leone. Before the year was out, clashes between the rebels and United Nations peacekeeping troops—which had been deployed in Sierra Leone—had resumed, culminating in the taking of 300 UN hostages. In mid-2000 fighting again slowed and rebel leader Foday Sankoh was captured, opening the door for the use of special courts to charge those who committed wartime atrocities. In May 2002, the democratic election of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah brought relative stability to Sierra Leone.

The salient thread woven into all of the peace agreements negotiated on behalf of the people of Sierra Leone is that peace cannot take hold unless human rights, humanitarian law, and the participation of civil society are fully incorporated into government structures. Of particular importance to a lasting peace is that state agencies, authorized to use force (specifically the army and the police), must account for the needs of civil society. This thread speaks to the importance of promoting social justice in creating and maintaining peace. The ability and willingness of the police to work with members of civil society to promote social justice should be of great interest.

In Freetown, I'm conducting an analytical case study to answer the question "Has the police reform undertaken in Sierra Leone led to increased trust in the police by various segments of the community?" We can illustrate some of the issues involved in examining trust between the community and the police. The findings reflect the preliminary results of field research undertaken in February and May 2003.

Peace must be built on the foundation of social justice, which requires more than the absence of conflict in a society and more than a reduction of crime and violence within and between communities. While the cessation of hostilities can be achieved by a peace accord, peace can be maintained only when state agencies support the new ethos of peace. To promote social justice, criminal justice agencies, including police agencies, must recognize and incorporate the needs of the community as defined by the community. This cannot happen without a certain fundamental trust between the police and the communities they serve. In Sierra Leone, trust has been broken by the use of the police to enforce corrupt governmental policies, the corrupt nature of the police agency itself, high levels of impunity for those who cause harm, and low levels of police professionalism in terms of wages, training, and equipment.

While the police are traditionally seen from a Western perspective as an agency that can defend citizens against crime and violence as well as promote social justice, in Sierra Leone there is no such tradition. Upon closer examination, even in developed countries without a tradition of conflict and violence, asking police to work simultaneously on these two goals may create a Catch 22 situation. It is difficult to demand that the police cede power to enable citizens or their representatives to participate in the co-production of community safety and at the same time maintain power over the community to the extent thought necessary to limit illegal, harmful, and disruptive behavior. Within this Catch 22 situation, we can examine the change in the Sierra Leone police mandate to include community members and their views in the development of a safe and just community.
In Sierra Leone, the police service has recently adopted the motto “A Force for Good” and has begun to deliver services under the rubric of “local needs” policing. This model can be characterized by four elements. First is the decentralization of command to the community level; second is highlighting human rights protection as a priority in service delivery (for example the creation and maintenance of written documentation of suspects in local police custody); third, incorporation of the view of the community into their problem definition and priority setting, primarily through the use of police partnership boards (PPBs); and finally the creation of family support units (FSUs) focused on victims, witnesses, and perpetrators of domestic and family violence.

To increase trust between the police and the community and to carry out the mandate of “local needs” policing toward the promotion of social justice, it is necessary to increase communication, accountability, and transparency in the management of police agencies and in the delivery of police services. These concepts cannot be defined from a Western perspective and imposed on the community but rather must be adopted by the people of Sierra Leone in a culturally relevant manner. This is critically important, as Mariane Ferme points out, among Mende peoples for whom “truth is what lies under multiple layers of often conflicting meaning.” Changing the behavior of citizens is also required to support lasting change and thereby peace. Citizens must become aware of their rights, and must be willing to challenge the status quo of police–community interactions at the street and policy levels.

An example of movement toward increased communication, transparency, and accountability can be seen on the sign shown in Figure 1, which can be found posted on the wall of the Kingtom police station in greater Freetown. The sign provides citizens with information about their rights, advising them that they may make a complaint to the police and that the police will make a report of the complaint and follow it up with an interview of witnesses and if appropriate will detain and charge suspects.

The statements included on this sign have meaning on a number of levels. For example they can be seen as a reassurance to “small men” that their complaints will be taken seriously and acted upon even if the object of their complaint is a “big man.” It may also serve to remind the police officer, who may himself be a “small man,” that witnesses must be interviewed even if the suspect is a “big man.” It is a reminder that the complainant has no obligation to “buy” supplies necessary for the complaint to be taken, such as paper and pen. Items five and six tell people of their right to be bailed out of jail with no money changing hands. In many police stations there are additional signs reminding citizens that women are also eligible to provide the required surety for a suspect to be released on bail.

The final two statements on the sign reflect what could be characterized as a lingering ambivalence toward community members who seek service from the police. Namely, citizens who are seen to be loiterers or liars have no business in the police station. Finally the last statement can be seen as setting up a victim-blaming scenario, since if the police have made a commitment to treat honest complainants fairly it might be assumed that a complainant who does not receive fair treatment from the police has not made an honest complaint.

Although the “local needs” policing scheme is founded on the tenet of
community participation and partnership, the development of true participation of the community has been, and continues to be, problematic. In Sierra Leone, community participation with local police is based on a model of police partnership boards. To examine some of the issues involved in police–community interactions, it is necessary to understand the traditional justice system that provides, for the most part, the community leadership that acts as the interface between the police and the community. To better see the integration between police and community leaders, we can consider the following information, taken from interviews with police involved in partnership boards as well as local customary justice representatives and other community leaders.

Figure 1. Sign at Kingtom Police Station informing citizens of their rights.
The city of Freetown is divided into sections, each of which has representatives of the traditional or customary justice system, which somewhat parallels the Western justice system in which the Sierra Leone police reside. The traditional leader, or section chief, who is often appointed or “elected” to his or her position because of family ties or “big man” status, dispenses justice in two significant areas: land disputes and family matters.

Land disputes are widespread due to the movement of landowners from their land during the civil war and the subsequent use of the seemingly unused land by displaced persons that moved into Freetown to escape human rights abuses in other parts of the country. As peace is restored, community-level disputes arise when original landowners come back to reclaim their land only to find that other families have set up housekeeping there. While a conflict may have begun as a land dispute, it may escalate to include violent crime resulting from the clash over the disputed territory.

The second major area handled by traditional leaders is domestic disputes. This category includes a wide continuum of activities—from intra-family disagreements (based on inheritance issues, for example) to allegations of spousal and child abuse that can include serious bodily harm up to and including rape and loss of life. Intertwined within these two issues are traditional beliefs about sources of power encompassing what might be termed “witchcraft,” an issue that cannot be overlooked when examining the interactions between police and community in Sierra Leone.

The traditional justice system is entrenched in the culture and the way of life of Freetown’s citizens; its leaders are powerful and influential men and women. The police, as members of the community, understand this context and consider it in their planning of police–community partnership boards. Within this context, the police have created partnership boards made up of community leaders identified by heads of the traditional justice system. In other words, the Freetown area police partnership board membership is made up of community leaders identified for the police by the section chiefs of the local area covered by that board. The boards cover a wide range of community interests. For example, in the Congo Cross station, where most of my field research is focused, the PPB has representatives from the local primary school administration, a youth group, the leader of the market women, a representative of the local truck drivers, business leaders, civil servants, a city council coordinator, community elders, and a leader of the Hunters (a secret society). All of the individuals were approved of by the local customary leader.

Based on my preliminary findings, the motivation of the community leaders to participate in the local partnership boards can be attributed to increased trust between the police and the community. The macro-level changes being made by the Sierra Leone police under the tutelage of the British government are perceived by the community as an enhancement of the traditional justice system rather than as an attempt to replace it. Community leaders also noted that the police service is one of the few public agencies attempting to create a positive impact on the community and is therefore seen as a link to increasing community interaction with all types of government services, including healthcare, education, and employment.

In contrast to the lack of local participation which is often found in low
income and minority communities in the United States and in the United Kingdom, in Sierra Leone there were many groups and individuals that were interested in participating in the police partnership boards but which were told that they could not do so. Those individuals and groups who were excluded from the more influential PPBs, however, were then invited to attend larger public meetings. For example, the two partnership boards that are currently functioning were launched with great fanfare, using large public celebrations with the entire community welcomed.

The final example of changes in the police mandate to incorporate the community's voice is the strong push to protect the human rights of women and children by treating domestic violence—including rape and spousal and child abuse—as a criminal offense. Family support units were set up among the Sierra Leone police in 2002 specifically to take reports of domestic violence and to protect victims and witnesses of crime who are women or children. Police consultants from the U.K. provide training for the FSUs using policies and procedures adapted from accepted practices in the U.K. and incorporated under the "local needs" policing model.

The reforms being put into place to protect women and children provide an underpinning for building toward a stronger civil society. When the human rights of women are protected through the criminalization of their victimization, they will have greater opportunity to move into positions of influence within society. This in turn could lead to a more representative influence on government practices, including policing, and create the potential for a more peaceful society.

Police often follow the lead of civil society in the manner in which they deliver services to the community. Police in a democratic environment are charged with balancing the protection of human rights and allowing citizens to participate in the co-production of community safety on one hand and the need to limit the potential for harmful acts on the other. In countries lacking a tradition of democracy and protection of human rights, the police are not as likely to have been inculcated in these values. Police can and must play a role in creating and maintaining peace in societies where trust between the police and the citizens has been damaged and where this lack of trust has contributed to armed conflict. In Sierra Leone, where there is not a tradition of trust between the police and the community, the police must take the lead in promoting social justice and the participation of civil society in order to build infrastructures that can sustain, maintain, and build peace.

**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


Natalie Pearl is an associate professor of public administration at San Diego State University with an interest in the role of police in promoting social justice in societies that are moving from conflict to peace. *Correspondence*: School of Public Administration and Urban Studies, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92182-4505, U.S.A. Email: Pearl@mail.sdsu.edu