

Title

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY-LED-ADVOCACY ON SOCIAL JUSTICE OUTCOMES: A CASE STUDY OF KANENGO COMMUNITY POLICING DEPARTMENT AT KANENGO POLICE IN LILONGWE.

Author

KENNEDY JOSHUA KUNTENGA

Co-Author

JUSTIN MAKAMO



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ABSTRACT

Community-led advocacy has emerged as a vital mechanism for promoting social justice, enhancing transparency, and fostering trust between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. This study examines the impact of community-led advocacy on social justice outcomes within the Kanengo Community Policing Department at Kanengo Police in Lilongwe. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with community members, police officers, and local advocacy leaders, alongside focus group discussions and document analysis of community policing reports and policy frameworks. The study investigates how community-driven initiatives influence police accountability, citizen engagement, crime reporting, and conflict resolution, as well as the challenges and opportunities inherent in these advocacy efforts.

Findings indicate that active community participation has significantly improved social justice outcomes by fostering mutual trust, also increasing responsiveness of police services, and facilitating timely intervention in cases of social and domestic disputes. Furthermore, the presence of organized community advocacy structures has enhanced collaboration, allowing for the identification of localized crime trends and the development of context-specific interventions. Despite these positive outcomes, challenges such as limited, occasional resistance from law enforcement personnel, and insufficient public awareness hinder the full potential of community-led advocacy.

The study concludes that sustained investment in community policing programs, coupled with capacity-building

initiatives for both citizens and law enforcement officers, is essential for maximizing social justice gains. Recommendations include strengthening advocacy training, promoting inclusive dialogue, and institutionalizing mechanisms for regular feedback between the police and the community. This research contributes to the broader discourse on participatory policing and social justice by demonstrating that community-led advocacy is not only a catalyst for improved policing outcomes.

Keywords: Community-led advocacy, Social justice, Community policing, Citizen engagement, Police accountability, Lilongwe.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, community-led advocacy has gained recognition as a powerful tool for promoting social justice, enhancing transparency, and strengthening relationships between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. Social justice, broadly understood as the equitable distribution of resources, protection of human rights, and fair treatment under the law, remains a pressing concern in many urban settings, particularly in rapidly growing cities where socioeconomic disparities and crime rates are prevalent. Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi, is no exception. With increasing population density and urbanization, the city faces challenges related to public safety, crime prevention, and citizen trust in policing institutions.

Background

Community-led advocacy has emerged as a critical mechanism for promoting social justice, accountability, and citizen

empowerment in modern governance systems. Social justice, broadly defined as the fair treatment of individuals and equitable access to resources, remains a central challenge in urban areas facing rapid population growth, economic disparities, and rising crime rates. In Malawi, law enforcement agencies have increasingly recognized the limitations of traditional policing methods, which often prioritize enforcement over community engagement. This has led to the adoption of community policing initiatives, where residents actively participate in crime prevention, conflict resolution, and monitoring of police activities.

The Kanengo Community Policing Department at Kanengo Police Station exemplifies this participatory approach. By fostering dialogue between citizens and law enforcement, community-led advocacy initiatives aim to enhance transparency, accountability, and trust in the police. Globally, research suggests that active community participation in policing can reduce crime, improve citizen satisfaction, and strengthen social cohesion. However, there is limited empirical evidence on the direct impact of such initiatives on social justice outcomes within the Malawian context, highlighting the need for focused case studies.

Context

Lilongwe, Malawi's capital city, has experienced significant urbanization over the past decade, resulting in increased social and economic pressures on communities and law enforcement agencies alike. In neighborhoods such as Kanengo, challenges include petty crime, domestic disputes, and occasional public unrest. These issues are compounded by limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and gaps in public trust towards formal policing institutions.

The Kanengo Community Policing Department was established to bridge the gap between law enforcement and citizens by encouraging community participation in safety initiatives. Local advocacy groups collaborate with police officers to identify crime patterns, mediate disputes, and educate residents about their rights and responsibilities. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of community-led advocacy in producing tangible social justice outcomes—such as equitable treatment, fair conflict resolution, and enhanced access to justice—remains underexplored. Understanding the specific mechanisms, successes, and challenges of community-led advocacy in Kanengo is essential for replicating effective strategies in other urban areas of Malawi.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main goal of this study is to assess the impact of community-led advocacy on social justice outcomes in the Kanengo Community Policing Department. The specific objectives are:

- To examine how community-led advocacy influences police accountability and responsiveness.
- To explore the role of citizen engagement in improving social justice outcomes.
- To identify the challenges and opportunities that affect the effectiveness of community-led advocacy initiatives.

By achieving these objectives, the study aims to provide insights into the practical benefits and limitations of community participation in policing and contribute to policy recommendations for strengthening social justice and participatory governance in Lilongwe and similar urban contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-Led Advocacy and Social Justice

Community-led advocacy is increasingly recognized as a critical strategy for promoting social justice, particularly in urban contexts where marginalized populations face systemic inequalities. According to *Gaventa (2006)*, advocacy empowers communities by giving them a voice in decision-making processes, thereby enhancing accountability and transparency in public institutions. In the context of policing, community advocacy allows citizens to participate in identifying local problems, shaping policing priorities, and monitoring law enforcement behavior, which can contribute to fairer outcomes and reduced human rights violations (*Bradford, 2014*).

Research indicates that social justice outcomes are closely linked to the degree of community participation in governance. For instance, *Wampler and Avritzer (2004)* highlight that participatory mechanisms, including advocacy and community monitoring, lead to better allocation of resources and improved responsiveness of local authorities. In Malawi, however, studies on community-led advocacy's impact remain limited, with most research focusing on broader governance frameworks rather than specific policing outcomes (*Chinsinga, 2017*). This gap underscores the need to explore how localized advocacy initiatives, such as those led by Kanengo community policing groups, contribute to social justice in practice.

Community Policing and Citizen Engagement

Community policing is a model that emphasizes collaboration between law enforcement agencies and the communities

they serve. It is premised on the idea that crime prevention and social order are most effective when communities are active participants rather than passive observers (*Skogan, 2006*). Empirical studies have shown that citizen engagement in policing initiatives improves trust, reduces fear of crime, and enhances perceptions of fairness (*Gill et al., 2014*).

In African contexts, community policing has often been linked to improved social cohesion and conflict resolution. For example, *Mwaura (2015)* found that community policing initiatives in Kenya's urban neighborhoods led to higher levels of citizen reporting, better response times, and stronger collaboration between police and local leaders. Similarly, in South Africa, community engagement in policing has been associated with reduced incidents of petty crime and increased public confidence in the police (*Pillay & Naidoo, 2018*). These studies highlight that active community participation is crucial not only for crime reduction but also for broader social justice outcomes, such as fairness, accountability, and protection of rights.

Mechanisms of Impact

Community-led advocacy influences social justice outcomes through multiple mechanisms. One key mechanism is enhancing accountability. Through organized advocacy, communities can monitor police performance, report misconduct, and demand adherence to legal standards (*Boehm, 2017*). In addition, advocacy fosters inclusive decision-making, ensuring that marginalized voices are considered in determining safety priorities and resource allocation (*Cornwall, 2008*).

Another mechanism is conflict resolution and crime prevention. Active community

involvement allows for early identification of social disputes, which can be resolved before escalating into formal criminal cases. Research in Nigeria by *Aremu (2016)* shows that neighborhoods with strong advocacy networks experience lower incidences of domestic violence and minor crimes due to timely intervention and community-led mediation. This underscores the link between advocacy and tangible improvements in social justice outcomes.

Relevance to the Kanengo Context

Studies from urban African contexts suggest that structured community advocacy programs, when effectively implemented, can significantly improve policing outcomes and social justice. For instance, pilot programs in Kenya and South Africa demonstrate measurable reductions in crime, improved police responsiveness, and enhanced citizen satisfaction (*Mwaura, 2015*; *Pillay & Naidoo, 2018*). Drawing on this evidence, the Kanengo Community Policing Department in Lilongwe provides a valuable case study for understanding how localized advocacy influences social justice outcomes in Malawi, especially in a setting facing urbanization, social inequality, and resource constraints.

Challenges in Community-Led Advocacy

While the benefits of community-led advocacy are well documented, challenges remain. Resource constraints, lack of formal training, and occasional resistance from law enforcement officers can limit the effectiveness of advocacy initiatives (*Chohan & Kinyanjui, 2019*). In Malawi, *Chinsinga and Chasukwa (2018)* note that although community policing programs exist, inconsistent implementation and insufficient citizen awareness often hinder full engagement. Additionally, cultural factors and power

imbalances within communities can prevent equitable participation, limiting the inclusivity of advocacy efforts (*Gaventa, 2006*).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The employs a qualitative case study design to explore the impact of community-led advocacy on social justice outcomes in the Kanengo Community Policing Department at Kanengo Police Station in Lilongwe. The case study approach is appropriate because it allows an in-depth examination of complex social processes within a real-life context (*Yin, 2018*). By focusing on a specific community and policing unit, the study captures the nuances of interactions between citizens and law enforcement, as well as the mechanisms through which advocacy influences social justice outcomes.

Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for understanding subjective experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. Since the study focuses on citizen engagement, police responsiveness, and community advocacy mechanisms, qualitative data provide rich insights into these phenomena, which cannot be fully captured through quantitative metrics alone (*Creswell & Poth, 2018*).

Study Area

The study is conducted in Kanengo, an urban residential area in Lilongwe, Malawi. Kanengo has a diverse population and faces typical urban challenges, including petty crime, domestic disputes, and occasional public unrest. The Kanengo Community Policing Department was selected due to its active engagement with

local advocacy groups and its mandate to promote collaboration between police officers and community members. This context allows for the examination of community-led advocacy initiatives in a practical setting where both successes and challenges can be observed.

Target Population and Sampling

The study population includes

- Community members involved in advocacy initiatives.
- Police officers working in the Kanengo Community Policing Department.
- Local leaders and representatives of community organizations engaged in safety and justice programs.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants with direct experience or knowledge of community-led advocacy and its impact on policing outcomes (*Palinkas et al., 2015*). This approach ensures that data are collected from individuals who can provide detailed, relevant, and insightful information. The study targeted 30–40 participants, including approximately 20 community members, 10 police officers, and 5–10 local advocacy leaders.

Data Collection Methods

Multiple data collection methods were employed to ensure triangulation and reliability of findings:

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members, police officers, and advocacy leaders. Open-ended questions allowed participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and

suggestions regarding community-led advocacy and its effect on social justice outcomes. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Two focus group discussions were held with community members to encourage collective reflection on advocacy initiatives. FGDs facilitated the exploration of shared experiences, community challenges, and perceptions of police responsiveness. Each group consisted of 6–8 participants and lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Document Analysis

Relevant documents, including community policing reports, advocacy records, and local policy guidelines, were reviewed to complement primary data. Document analysis helped identify patterns, verify participant accounts, and understand institutional frameworks supporting community advocacy.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by *Braun and Clarke (2006)*. The process involved:

- Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and FGD notes.
- Generating initial codes for recurring ideas, patterns, and themes.
- Searching for broader themes that capture the essence of participants' experiences.
- Reviewing and refining themes to

ensure clarity and consistency.

- Defining and naming themes to reflect their relevance to community-led advocacy and social justice.
- Producing a final report with illustrative quotes to support findings.

NVivo software was used to organize and code qualitative data systematically, enhancing the reliability and transparency of the analysis.

RESULTS

Introduction

This section presents the findings of the study on the impact of community-led advocacy on social justice outcomes at the Kanengo Community Policing Department in Lilongwe. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews (30 participants), two focus group discussions (14 participants), and document analysis of community policing reports. The results are organized thematically to align with the research objectives: (1) influence on police accountability and responsiveness, (2) role of citizen engagement in social justice, and (3) challenges and opportunities of advocacy initiatives.

Influence of Community-Led Advocacy on Police Accountability and Responsiveness

Participants overwhelmingly reported that community advocacy initiatives have improved police accountability. Citizens noted that police officers were more responsive to crime reports and disputes after the establishment of community advocacy groups.

Perceptions of Police Responsiveness (n = 30)

The results indicate varying levels of responsiveness among participants. Half of the respondents (50%, n=15) rated the service as moderately responsive, making this the most common response. This was followed by very responsive, reported by 27% (n=8). Smaller proportions described the service as slightly responsive (17%, n=5) or not responsive (6%, n=2). Overall, the findings suggest that while responsiveness is generally moderate, there remains room for improvement.

From interviews, one community member stated

Before our advocacy group, police took days to respond to issues like theft or domestic disputes. Now, they come quickly when we report problems, and they sometimes ask for our input before taking action.

Document analysis corroborated this perception. Reports from the Kanengo Community Policing Department showed a 25% increase in timely responses to community-reported incidents between 2022 and 2024.

Role of Citizen Engagement in Improving Social Justice Outcomes

Citizen participation emerged as a critical factor in promoting fairness, transparency, and equitable treatment. Focus group discussions revealed that community members feel more empowered to report crimes, resolve conflicts, and ensure their voices are heard in policing decisions.

Community Engagement Activities

- **Crime reporting:** 85%
- **Conflict mediation:** 70%
- **Awareness campaigns on rights:** 65%
- **Participation in community policing meetings:** 60% Participants highlighted specific improvements

- **Conflict resolution:** Local disputes are now often mediated collaboratively, reducing escalation to legal action.
- **Crime prevention:** Residents actively monitor areas prone to theft and vandalism, collaborating with officers for timely interventions.
- **Trust building:** Citizens expressed increased confidence in police fairness and impartiality, noting a sense of co-ownership of public safety initiatives.

Opportunities and Positive Outcomes

Despite challenges, participants identified several opportunities that strengthen the effectiveness of community-led advocacy

- **Capacity building:** Training workshops for both police and community members enhance collaboration and understanding of social justice principles.
- **Collaborative planning:** Joint meetings to identify priority areas for crime prevention have led to more targeted interventions.
- **Community recognition:** Successful advocacy efforts have increased public trust and engagement, which positively reinforces community-police partnerships.

Positive Outcomes of Advocacy

- Increased trust in police: 80%
- Improved conflict resolution: 65%
- Faster response to incidents: 55%

Document analysis also indicated that neighborhoods with active advocacy groups experienced a 20% reduction in reported petty crimes over a two-year

period, suggesting a tangible impact of community-led initiatives on social justice outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study examined the impact of community-led advocacy on social justice outcomes in the Kanengo Community Policing Department at Kanengo Police Station in Lilongwe. The findings demonstrate that advocacy initiatives significantly influence police accountability, citizen engagement, and overall fairness in the community. This discussion contextualizes these results within existing literature, highlighting both theoretical and practical implications.

Impact on Police Accountability and Responsiveness

The study found that community-led advocacy enhances police accountability and responsiveness. Participants reported faster response times, increased openness to community input, and greater adherence to procedural fairness. These findings align with *Bradford (2014)*, who argued that active citizen participation in policing strengthens transparency and reduces misconduct. Similarly, *Skogan (2006)* noted that community policing initiatives are most effective when residents are empowered to monitor and provide feedback to law enforcement agencies.

In Kanengo, structured advocacy mechanisms, such as joint planning meetings and community monitoring, appear to have institutionalized accountability measures. This suggests that advocacy not only facilitates immediate improvements in police responsiveness but also contributes to longer-term

institutional change. It confirms *Gaventa's* (2006) observation that sustained citizen engagement can reshape power dynamics and enhance governance outcomes.

Role of Citizen Engagement in Social Justice Outcomes

Citizen engagement emerged as a central factor in improving social justice. Participants reported increased participation in crime reporting, conflict resolution, and awareness campaigns, which collectively strengthened perceptions of fairness and equity. These results corroborate the findings of *Wampler and Avritzer* (2004), who emphasized that participatory mechanisms enable communities to influence decision-making, allocate resources more equitably, and ensure that marginalized voices are heard.

Moreover, the collaborative resolution of local disputes illustrates the link between advocacy and social justice. Community-led interventions helped reduce reliance on formal legal processes, allowing faster and context-sensitive resolutions. This resonates with *Mwaura's* (2015) study in Kenya, which highlighted that community policing fosters social cohesion and strengthens informal justice mechanisms, ultimately contributing to equitable outcomes.

Challenges and Limitations of Advocacy Initiatives

Despite the positive outcomes, the study identified several challenges that may limit the full potential of advocacy. Resource constraints, occasional resistance from police officers, and insufficient public awareness were prominent barriers. These findings are consistent with *Chohan and Kinyanjui* (2019), who noted that participatory policing programs often

struggle due to limited funding and institutional resistance.

Furthermore, social inequalities within the community sometimes hindered equitable participation, reflecting *Gaventa's* (2006) concern that power imbalances can restrict the inclusivity of advocacy initiatives. Addressing these barriers is critical to ensuring that community-led advocacy achieves its full impact on social justice outcomes.

Opportunities and Implications for Practice

The study also highlights significant opportunities to strengthen the effectiveness of advocacy initiatives. Capacity-building programs for both community members and police officers enhance collaboration, understanding of rights, and responsiveness. Joint planning and regular feedback mechanisms were particularly effective in improving trust and co-ownership of safety initiatives. These practices align with findings by *Pillay and Naidoo* (2018) in South Africa, where collaborative engagement increased citizen satisfaction and reduced crime rates.

Institutional support from police leadership is essential to overcome resistance and ensure sustainability. By formalizing advocacy structures and integrating them into policing strategies, community engagement can become a routine and valued aspect of governance rather than a temporary initiative.

CONCLUSION

The discussion highlights that community-led advocacy in Kanengo positively affects social justice outcomes by enhancing police accountability, fostering citizen engagement, and promoting fair conflict

resolution. While challenges such as resource limitations and resistance exist, structured advocacy programs offer substantial opportunities for improving both governance and social cohesion. These findings underscore the importance of empowering communities as active stakeholders in policing and social justice initiatives, reinforcing the broader principle that sustainable development and equitable governance are best achieved through participatory approaches.

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