

# Wrong Number

When Technology Fails Police and Communities: Lessons from Somaliland

Prof. Alice Hills, Durham University

*Based on fieldwork in Somaliland's capital, Hargeisa, this brief shows how local preferences can undermine the availability of globalised technologies.*

*It is often assumed that the application of ICT can help to improve communications between police and local communities in fragile societies, thereby deterring crime and lessening distrust.*

*But can the use of information and communications technology (ICT) such as mobile telephones make a difference to police-community engagement? Can it deter crime and improve police response rates in fragile societies where most people have access to mobiles? What do local people expect of their police?*

*In fact, as the record of a text alert system in Hargeisa emphasises, police-community engagement reflects local cultural preferences and these may counteract the availability of globalised technology.*

*Hargeisa's experiment offers insights into the everyday choices shaping low-level policing. It reflects local expectations and how they are, rather than should be, fulfilled. It emphasises that rather than being a solution to poor policing, ICT may distract from the need for communities to take the initiative in engaging with police.*



**D**onor policies assume that development requires communities to feel secure, with police forces the preferred provider. However, people across Africa distrust police, seeing officers and the stations they operate from as threats to be avoided, rather than as sources of protection or assistance.

**S**olutions to this problem include community policing schemes, training courses on human rights, the creation of model police stations, and the renaming of police forces as police services, but none has delivered its promises. Perhaps because of this, donors look to ICT as a tool for improving police-community engagement.

**A**t first glance, the self-proclaimed republic of Somaliland is an ideal candidate for ICT-driven change. On the one hand, its police's record is one of corruption, negligence and inadequate resources<sup>1</sup>. On the other, cheap call tariffs and high rates of access to mobiles persuade donors that mobiles can be a tool for sharing information, thereby lessening the distrust and poor response rates characterising everyday policing while facilitating security for all.

This belief is reinforced by the success in neighbouring Kenya of mobile-based banking systems such as M-Pesa, commercial operations such as M-Kopa, tracking organisations like Ushahidi, and community policing's use of social media<sup>2</sup>. The failure of toll-free reporting lines in Mogadishu is, however, ignored; Mogadishu's 888 emergency number rarely responds to calls while its 111 rape hotline attracts only complaints against AMISOM.

*“At first glance, Somaliland is an ideal candidate for ICT-driven change*

These trends came together on 19 August 2015 when Somaliland's Ministry of Interior (MoI) launched a 'text alert community police engagement programme' at Hargeisa's Macalin Haruun police station. The project rapidly lost momentum but it matters here because its granular detail helps us to avoid sweeping generalisations about ICT's potential to improve police-community engagement.

## Text Alert System

Designed as a tool for crime prevention, the project, which was developed in co-ordination with EUCAP Nestor (a civilian mission forming part of the European Commission's external action programme) was straightforward: the public would use mobiles to alert the police to security issues requiring attention.

In becoming 'the eyes and ears' of the police, the public would help to improve police-community engagement while enabling scarce police resources to be targeted where they are most needed. But the system depends on people contacting the police via texts and officers' logging the call, verifying it as legitimate and responding by deploying to the scene. This did not happen.

In the days following the launch, the minister returned to his office, the publicity campaign evaporated, the police

commander went on leave for six weeks, the mobiles donated to the police stayed in their boxes, and the station's radio room was locked. By December, few (if any) alerts had been received. How can this be explained?

**H**ow it works: Macalin Haruun's system is based on a SIM box with cards and is connected to a laptop computer that creates groups and sends messages; it is basic but reliable, which matters when only 1-2% of Somaliland's population has an IT connection. The station is open 24-hours, seven days a week, and taking messages should not be a problem because 16 officers have been trained, with eight covering each of the three shifts usual in small stations. Actions are logged on police mobile phones and in a log book, keyed into the system manually and a message is then sent over the computer system.

In theory this should take about 30 seconds but the process is actually haphazard. Hoax calls are a problem, not all officers have the necessary keyboard skills, senior officers able to authorise responses are not always available, and information is lost if the phone is mislaid.

**W**hy it failed: The primary reason for the system's failure is that people did not submit texts. The practical explanations for this include the lack of an emergency number (the MoI reserves 100 for emergencies) and the independence of Somaliland's main telecoms providers, Telecom, Somtel and Nationlink. This means that some mobiles are accessed by three or four SIM cards. The cost of messages is a consideration too, for while texts are free for officers, who do not pay for responding to or verifying a call, the public must pay. And the SIM card used must be pre-paid or in credit.

*“The primary reason for the system's failure is that people did not submit texts*

Legacy issues also intrude. The text alert system is an element within a broad approach to community policing, and such policing reminds many Somalilanders of former president Barre's repressive system of local councils; 'hamuunta' or 'directing the people' was a means for managing groups or clans that Barre saw as a threat. Other reasons include the failure of President Silanyo's government to encourage community engagement, and the unwillingness of the MoI and EUCAP to make the necessary political commitment.

## What Local People Think

Community perspectives on the system can be deduced from focus groups and interviews carried out in Macalin Haruun and five neighbouring districts in March 2016. The respondents, 180 in total, provide a snapshot of the social environment in which Hargeisa's police operate in terms of gender, age and education. There are inconsistencies between respondents' stated willingness to contact the police and the system's records but, overall, the results suggest that ICT has little to offer Hargeisa's locally acceptable — and functioning — policing system.

**Contacting police:** Respondents were asked whether they had contacted the police and if so, when and why. Those who had were asked whether they had done so using mobiles, how they had been treated, and whether or not they would go back.

Normally, the results show, people communicate with the police by driving or walking to the police station, not by using mobile phones, although some do. Some experienced that the police failed to respond to calls, and a minority reported that they had no means of communicating with the police. All agreed on one point, however: No one had used the text alert system. Furthermore, even though most admitted that mobiles allowed information to spread quickly and police to call for back-up units, no one expected this to happen.

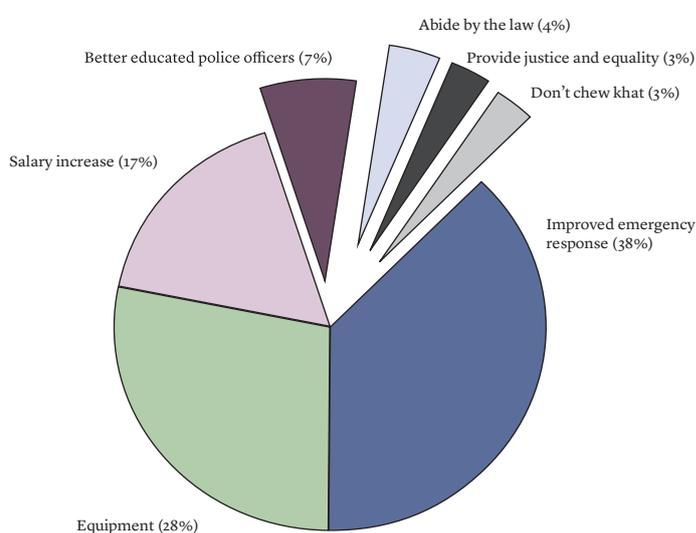
*“Overall, the results suggest that ICT has little to offer Hargeisa's policing system”*

**Police work and what people want:** The basic elements of police-community relations were addressed using questions about the police's job and the response rates of informal policing groups. All respondents agreed that the police's job includes securing peace and stability, from the village to the national level, and providing a quick response to insecurity. A clear majority stated that local people should help the police to do their jobs effectively and promptly but a minority held that local people do not support the police during their activities.

Given the police's flawed record, respondents were asked what would improve police response rates and what kind of police they would like their children to meet. Most argued that police need more financial support, equipment and stations though some also wanted to see an improvement

in their status in the community. Significantly, respondents in Macalin Haruun said that officers would respond quickly and effectively if only they received more equipment, a salary increase, education, better treatment within the police or stopped chewing the narcotic qat (see chart).

What Would Help To Make The Police Respond To Crime Quickly?



None mentioned toll-free crime-stopper lines specifically, but some stressed the desirability of a direct contact line for emergencies and the need for improved communications tools. The ideal for all respondents — and what they hope their children will encounter — is an honest police which performs its tasks efficiently and does not harm civilians.

**Accommodating reality:** The most surprising result came in response to questions about the text alert system. Despite extensive publicity seven months before, only five of the 142 present in Macalin Haruun had heard of it even though four out of 10 had friends or relatives in the police and half had been to Macalin Haruun station. This probably reflects cultural preferences. Anecdotally, people with access to mobiles or SIM cards are comfortable ringing the police, especially when they wish to 'tell the government' (a commonly used phrase) about a potential incident, but they do not use text messaging. This may reflect literacy levels or Somaliland's oral culture, or the knowledge that police cannot respond quickly.

Nonetheless, most appear satisfied with the police and wish to support officers in their job, arranging their lives to accommodate its limited and reactive role.

One such tactic is for districts and villages in the Hargeisa area to collaborate with the police to establish community-policing groups for night-time duties. Each pays its 'community police' a small monthly sum to safeguard its area at night. The youths, elders and women involved are integral parts of their communities in a way that formal police are not and they respond quickly.

But there are problems and many people fear that the groups are managed by the state for its own purposes, are infiltrated by al-Shabaab, or include ex-criminals. The groups' lack of formal offices and contact points makes them inaccessible, and they cannot afford to use mobile phones or transport, or pay for expenses.

## Conclusion

Macalin Haruun's experience illustrates local expectations and how they are, rather than should be, fulfilled. It reflects a society in which people have access to mobiles but choose not to send text messages to the police even though officers have (in theory) the manpower, mobiles, radios, vehicles and training needed. to respond to calls.

More importantly, it illustrates generic issues such as the ways in which local preferences can counteract the potential of globalised technology.

## Notes

- 1: Human Right Center (2015) 'Human Rights Centre: Annual Review 2015' (Hargeisa: HRC). <http://www.hrcsomaliland.org/attachments/article/154/Official%20Annual%20Review%202015.pdf>
- 2: Omanga, D. (2015) "Chieftaincy" in the Social Media Space: Community Policing in a Twitter Convened Baraza', *Stability* 4 (1). <http://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.eq/>

## Key Lessons

- *Local preferences can undermine the availability of globalised technology*
- *ICT does not necessarily make a significant contribution to crime prevention or police-community relations in fragile societies*
- *Police are not unequivocally agents for social change and policing is shaped as much by public expectations as by mutual distrust and inadequate resources*
- *Meaningful engagement depends on officers fulfilling societal expectations about the management of low-level disorder and local people accommodating the results*
- *Change requires initiative on the part of the community as much as initiatives by police*

## THE PROJECT

The ICT4COP research project seeks to understand human security in post-conflict settings by researching community-based policing and post-conflict police reform.

The Norwegian University of Life Sciences is the project coordinator.

Contact: Frode Bjerckås, Research Communications Specialist: [frode.bjerkas@nmbu.no](mailto:frode.bjerkas@nmbu.no); +4767231384



ICT4COP has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme under grant agreement No 653909

## THE AUTHOR

Prof. Dr. Alice Hills leads the Africa Work Package of ICT4COP and is professor at the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University.

She earned her PhD in War Studies from the University of London, was a professor of conflict and security at the University of Leeds, and has taught at the UK's Joint Services Command and Staff College.

Hills says: "I am indebted to senior officers and officials from Somaliland's Ministry of Interior and police, and, most importantly, EUCAP-Nestor, whose support made this research possible. Special thanks are due to Transparency Solutions for research assistance in Hargeisa. The views offered are nonetheless mine alone."