



Community-based approaches to dealing with rural violence

Based on Crisis States Programme *Working Paper no.16*: Suzette Heald, 'Domesticating Leviathan: Sungusungu Groups in Tanzania'. This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.

The end of the Tanzanian/Ugandan war in 1979 saw a sharp increase in rural banditry, official policies to combat which were largely ineffective. Local communities responded autonomously by forming their own community police forces (*sungusungu*), whose aim was to directly tackle the problem that the official police had so singularly failed to solve. Rather than opposing this, the central government actively encouraged such groups, seeking to involve them as an integral part of the rural administrative structure. In some areas this has shown itself to be a particularly successful means of controlling the rural crime and violence that was threatening to spiral out of control. Suzette Heald explores the development of the *sungusungu* in two regions where they proved to be most effective: Sukumaland, in Central Tanzania, and amongst the Kuria along the border with Kenya. She shows that respect for local needs and traditions, and the empowering of local communities, have been fundamental to this success.

- **Local response to local needs**

The *sungusungu* initially represented a taking back of power by the local communities, "like ants ...against the big thugs." They appear to have been most successful where they were given the freedom to develop and define their own norms and sanctions, in accordance with local custom and need.

- **Attempts at asserting state control counterproductive**

Cases where the state has attempted to institutionalise the groups into the administrative hierarchy, or even impose their own version of them, have proven to lead to a weakening of the *sungusungu*. There is a loss in popularity, and hence support, for the groups in these circumstances, combined with a distrust of what is seen as simply more of the same state interference.

- **Importance of charismatic leaders**

The *sungusungu* seem to have developed strongly in some areas, inspired by the initial presence of strong, charismatic leaders prepared to drive the process forwards. Leadership in local groups was and remains with local people. Although harsh in their methods, leaders haven't arbitrarily wielded power but acted in concert with their community. The action taken has been based on a combination of detailed local knowledge, independence from (often corrupt) local administrative and policing structures, the holding of public trials, and respecting local traditions and sensibilities.

- **Importance of punishment**

Where *sungusungu* have been prepared, and permitted, to mete out tough punishments they have proved themselves strongest. "We have found the medicine for thieves", and it is at times harsh, even leading to death. However, this has optimally been combined with clemency for those who admit their guilt and proffer compensation.

- **Need for transparency, inclusiveness and popular democracy**

Whereas in the past harsh punishment has been combined with corruption, abuses have been greatly attenuated through the radically democratic way in which the *sungusungu* have operated. Not only are all members of the local community expected to participate in the process of searching for, capturing, and the trial of criminals; but these trials are held in public, and decisions reached collectively. Membership of the *sungusungu* is extended to all, and its leadership is held directly accountable to the community assembly.

- **Rejuvenation of local community life**

On the one hand it has proven advantageous not simply to work with the elders of a local community, but to actively involve them in combating crime and violence, and to make use of and strengthen the power and respect that they command. On the other hand, the experience of *sungusungu* has not just led to these communities taking back power, but also to them developing new forms of organisation and cooperation. The long-term consequences of this for economic and social welfare are likely to be positive and extensive.

- **Reform and greater legitimation of the state**

Although allowing the *sungusungu* to operate was in part an admittance of the failure of the state to solve rural crime and violence, the fact that the central government was prepared to permit and even sponsor their development has done much to legitimise the national political structures and leadership. As a result, there are signs that the administration has become generally more responsive to the needs and demands of local communities, which has led to a strengthening of its position.

- **Spread increases effectiveness**

As the *sungusungu* movement has developed over wider areas, this has improved the effectiveness of such community policing. With individual groups communicating, and establishing reciprocal procedures, with other similar groups (even across national borders), it has become increasingly hard for criminals to simply escape by leaving the district. Effectiveness has also increased as the *sungusungu* have spread their attentions beyond just the cattle rustling they were initially set up to combat, towards inclusion of many crimes affecting the rural community.

- **Problem of multiple systems of law**

Since the *sungusungu* have effectively replaced the discredited police and judicial structures by taking the law into their own hands, although they have been supported in this by the national political administration, there has been a backlash against them on the part of the police and judiciary. The co-existence of these two legal systems (one official and hierarchical, the other unofficial and communal) produces tensions that have proven difficult to resolve, and has exposed many underlying flaws in the organisation of the state.

- **Continued challenges**

Although the *sungusungu* movement has succeeded in bringing government down to the people, and by so doing has greatly reduced rural crime and violence, a continual vigilance is necessary lest the threats reappear. While much has been done to remove guns from the countryside, foreign gun dealers, the army and the disgruntled police force continue to provide a source for weapons and ammunition. However, the communal changes that have accompanied the development of the *sungusungu* in many districts are likely to have a lasting effect on their ability to respond to future challenges.

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