

Police reform in Eastern Africa
Opening remarks – Police accountability and effectiveness conference
APCOF/KNCHR/CHRI
Nairobi, Kenya, June 2007

Good morning and welcome. My name is Daniel Woods and I am the Coordinator of the Police Reforms Programme at the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative.

As we start on the next three days of discussion on police accountability and effectiveness in Eastern Africa, I think it is fair to say that every person in this room believes that reform of the police systems in this region is critical and long overdue. Without transparent, democratic, accountable and effective police, East Africa's democracies can't function as they should, the basic human rights of people in the community won't be protected and promoted and the development of the communities and economies of East Africa will be stymied. The need to reform systems that date back to colonial rule is palpable – when I arrived in Nairobi yesterday, I picked up a copy of the Saturday Standard newspaper. The first seven pages of the paper dealt with police misconduct, ineffectiveness and the systemic issues at the core of the police in one way or another as it explored the police and government response to the extremely complex problem of the Mungiki. Seven pages of police ineffectiveness and misconduct in a Saturday paper is no sign of a working, healthy, accountable or effective police organisation.

We all know the task that is facing each of East Africa's countries in terms of police reform is immense. We have all heard the statistics and listened to the charges laid at the feet of the East African police – excessive use of force, brutality, illegal arrest and detention, corruption, partiality, extra-judicial executions and abuse of process. We know the police are hopelessly unsupported, under-resourced and working in extremely challenging and complex circumstances. We know that there are many people in the government and the police that are interested in keeping things the way they are for personal power or to keep their regime ruling.

The situation is far from hopeless, however, and I hope that over the next few days we can focus on the positive steps that can be made towards change; how to help the police understand how democratic and accountable policing makes their job easier and their work more effective; how communities can engage with police and governments and mobilize reform; and the ways that we can bring about change in Eastern Africa.

The reform process in Eastern Africa will be long, but each time a member of the community fights for one of their basic rights, or one of you lobby for reform, or a human rights institution investigates and deals with a police complaints, or a progressive police officers works to better the organisation, we move closer. It is important not to get disheartened by the size of the task or the apparent lack of impact of work for reform. CHRI, the organisation I am from, works on policing issues across the Commonwealth. In India, we have been working towards making a reform process a reality for over ten years. India's police laws date back to 1861. The political, social and cultural contexts that policing takes place within is different to Eastern Africa, but the similarities of community experience are astounding. I have sat in rooms in India and asked people from around South Asia – people from Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – what the problems with their police are. I have sat in different rooms in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and asked the same question. The responses are often word for word.

India's first attempts at reform date back to the late 1970s and there has been 25 years of government committees and commissions. But despite volumes of committee reports, a clear acknowledgement that something needs to change and years of work by organisations like CHRI, reform has only begun in earnest over the last year. The current reform process didn't just happen though; it is the culmination of all those years of work, pressure and advocating for reform. Every small step forward counts and builds the big change that will come.

Police reform in Eastern Africa
Opening remarks – Police accountability and effectiveness conference
APCOF/KNCHR/CHRI
Nairobi, Kenya, June 2007

In the five years that CHRI has been working on policing issues in East Africa, there has been a real shift and change in the policing debate. Six years ago I would not have said that bringing this group together to have the kinds of conversations we will have over the next three days was possible. The debate was not strong and the information about policing was hidden away. The next three days will show that the process towards reform is very much alive. But the process towards reform is also very much in its infancy and it has been two steps forward and one step backwards as governments, police and the community grapple with the complexities surrounding policing and change in a changing world.

The one thing I am sure of is that the process is going forward and one day we will look back on meetings such as this as the catalysts and seeds of change for democratic, accountable, transparent and effective police services. I look forward to spending the next three days with you all and being part of that catalyst and those seeds of change.

