Markus-Michael Müller

Citizen Participation and Crime Prevention in Latin America: The Problems Behind the Solution[1]

A recent flyer distributed by the Mexico City police department, the *Secretaría de Seguridad Pública del Distrito Federal* (SSPDF), informs local residents about the possibilities and merits of citizen participation in security matters. In addition to providing information about the different activities of the citizen participation program it ends with the following disclaimer:

> This program is of public character. It is not conveyed nor promoted by any political party and its resources come from the taxes paid by all taxpayers. It is forbidden to use this program for political and electoral goals, for pecuniary rewards or any other purposes different from those established in the program. Anyone that will make an improper use of the program's resources in the Federal District will be sanctioned according to the respective law and from the responsible authority (SSPDF 2009).

This uneasy and contradictory relationship between citizen participation in security matters and the instrumentalization, or better put, appropriation, of the latter for private or political purposes is at the centre of this article. By drawing on the results of empirical fieldwork in Mexico City, this article takes a closer look at a local community policing program, the *Policía de Barrio* project, in order to demonstrate that contrary to the expectations of many Latin American policy makers, think tanks, NGOs and a growing number of related scholarly articles and books, community participation in security matters cannot

---

be expected to function as a blueprint for improving citizen-police relations and the prevailing (in)security situation in contemporary urban Latin America (on the latter aspect, see IBRD 2008; Koonings/Kruijt 2007; Rotker 2002). By confronting the official claims and objectives of the *Policía de Barrio* program, together with an analysis of how this community policing program operates in practice, this article argues that despite its claim for improving police-citizen relations and the security situation, the concrete practices of the *Policía de Barrio* are overdetermined by different socio-political features of the local context, such as clientelism, police corruption, and party politics. These components, therefore, render the contribution of this community policing effort for the sustainable improvement of local accountability, police efficiency and legitimacy unlikely.

This article draws on the following sources to develop its argument: In addition to official documents, NGO reports and available academic literature, it is based on 20 expert interviews with current and former members of the local security apparatus, local residents and NGO members, that were conducted between 2006 and 2009. Based on a semi-structured questionnaire, expert interviews seek to obtain relevant information by interviewing actors who, due to their position and experience within a particular context, can be assumed to possess special knowledge about practices and processes within this social setting. Therefore, they can be described as "experts" (Bogner/Littig/Menz 2005). The interview material was then analyzed with a deductive categorization effort according to the method of qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2008).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. I will first offer a brief overview of the community-policing concept that will be discussed in the context of the recent community policing euphoria in Latin America. Next, I will give a brief introduction of the local context together with the relation between the implementation of the *Policía de Barrio* program and the local democratization process. Following this, I will highlight the main objectives and instruments of the *Policía de Barrio* program and will identify the important problems with regards to the way the program functions in practice. The concluding section will summarize the main findings of this article and outline directions for future research on this topic.

1. Community Policing comes to Latin America

As a consequence of the current perception of a "metropolization of crime" (Castillo 2008) throughout Latin America, urban policy makers in all major Latin American cities are increasingly looking abroad for solutions to the problems of urban insecurity. This contributes to a growing transnationalization of Latin American urban security governance, conceived as the growing involvement in and impact of external concepts and (frequently non-state) actors, such as international organizations, intergovernmental organizations, donor agencies, security consultants or NGOs, on local policing agendas. One important consequence of this development has been the import of policing strategies and concepts, mostly from Anglo-Saxon countries. The most prominent respective policing importations have been zero tolerance and/or broken windows policing efforts, which have played a part in the hegemony of *tolerancia cero* (zero tolerance) or *mano dura* (strong hand) security agendas in many countries in the region (Glebbeek 2010; Dammert/Malone 2006). Whereas these concepts have been widely criticized by academics and civil society organizations for their repressive nature and the human rights violations that frequently accompany their implementation, another imported Anglo-Saxon policing model received a more favorable response: community policing.

In fact, since the 1990s, an increasing number of Latin American countries have opted for a variety of community policing efforts. These efforts focus on enhancing the level of cooperation between local residents and the police at the neighborhood level. Such projects have been promoted and implemented in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela (Dammert 2004; Dammert/Malone 2006; Eilbaum 2004; Feth 2008; Föhrig/Pomares/Gortari 2006; Frühling 2004; Brogden/Nijhar 2005: 178-185; Sozzo 2005). Although there is still considerable academic debate as to how to define community policing, the following citation captures the official expectations associated with this concept:

> Officers and neighborhood residents approach each other as co-equal partners in the design and implementation of programs designed to address local problems. Such "co-production" practices can plausibly lead to greater effectiveness and greater legitimacy: effectiveness be-

> cause the community would be more fully involved; legitimacy because
> the police would be open to democratic oversight (Herbert 2001: 448).

Therefore, community-policing programs not only promise an improvement of the urban security environment, but also seek to make security governance more democratic, participatory, and accountable. These programs look to increase the local populations' confidence in the police, and to improve police sensitivity to citizens' security concerns.

The increasing attractiveness of community policing for Latin American urban policy makers is related to three interconnected dimensions: First, the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon policing discourses and practices, which seem to have become the global hallmark "of a new crime control establishment that draws upon the new criminologies of everyday life to guide its actions and mould its techniques" (Garland 2001: 17). Second, and closely related, the emergence of an international development discourse with obvious neoliberal undertones – which calls for police reform measures and promotes the principles of ownership, participation, and accountability (Buvinić/Alda/Lamas 2005: 11-13; for an important critique, see Stanley 2006) – that has converted community policing into "the current preferred police reform model in international aid and development circles" (Murphy 2007: 243). Finally, in the newly democratized political environment of Latin America, policy makers and police reformers are struggling more or less successfully – and with more or less political commitment – with the heritage of authoritarian rule and "political policing", which, in addition to the problems of frequent and endemic police abuse as well as the participation of police officers in criminal activities and large scale corruption, have seriously undermined confidence in the local police institutions as well as their credibility. These dimensions mutually reinforce each other and have contributed to the emergence of a political consensus among many academics, local NGO activists, and policy makers regarding the usefulness of community policing strategies as *the* "international best practices", whose adaptation to Latin America is not only perceived as a promising and sustainable security effort, but also as an important contribution to rebuilding trust in the local police forces.

What is frequently ignored is the fact that even with regard to Anglo-Saxon countries that first developed community policing strate-

gies, the alleged "success" and concrete achievements of such programs still leave open questions and unresolved matters of dispute (Herbert 2006; Stanley 2006; Waddington 1999). Furthermore, the Latin American promoters and practitioners of community policing also tend to ignore critical evaluations concerning the implementation of these programs in other regions of the Global South (Brogden 2002; Lau 2004; Ruteere/Pommerolle 2003). Summarizing much of these criticisms, Mike Brogden and Preeti Nijhar, in their detailed analysis of community policing efforts in the Global South, indicate that community policing is situated in a long and problematic tradition of "exporting used goods from the Western supermarkets of policing and other legal institutions to so-called developing and transitional countries". They further suggest that it is "at best, [an] unproven practice. At worst, it is simply a practice that reinforces existing schisms and inequalities" (Brogden/Nijhar 2005: 161, 229). In a similar direction, and with explicit reference to the equally ignored fact that community policing emerged as a response to a number of *genuine* US-American urban policing problems, Christopher Murphy recently stated:

> Its own Western development, suggests that to be effective COP [Community oriented Policing] requires mature democratic political governance, a legitimate, stable and effective police organisation, and a high level of community stability and consensus. But as most police reform environments have discredited, corrupt, unsophisticated, often violent and ineffective police forces and are in unstable, insecure and conflict ridden communities with undemocratic social and political forms of governance, its [sic!] not surprising that COP has often failed to be an effective policing model in such environments (Murphy 2007: 258).

These critical comments have been ignored by most of the current literature that supports and promotes the import of community policing to Latin America. To a certain degree, "bewitched" by an alleged ontological democratic potential of the "community" and the "demonstration effect" of the "new security doxa" (Wacquant 2009) in the guise of community policing, most of the related literature is characterized by an exclusive problem-solving orientation whose principal concern is the promotion of concrete action – for example, the implementation of community policing programs – not an in-depth analysis of the community policing concept itself (Feth 2008). Furthermore, it is not uncommon that respective state authori-

ties and security agencies themselves evaluate the outcomes of the politics they implement, and only in a very few cases do such publications include the perceptions and experiences of the recipients of community policing projects (Feth/Müller 2009). This, of course, does not imply that these studies are not aware of possible problems and shortcomings of community policing efforts. However, these problems are often perceived as technical problems that can be resolved through more efficient and sustainable implementation procedures (Frühling 2004: 28-36). This primarily technical and problem-solving orientation, as this article highlights and proposes, is an important factor in the shortcomings of the literature advocating large-scale implementation community policing programs in Latin America. These shortcomings exist in the absence of a deeper contextualization of local community policing ideas and practices, in particular with respect to their political appeal – beyond immediate security concerns – for local policy makers, as well as in their lack of sensitivity for the possibility of appropriating community policing resources for personal or political interests. In this regard, already in 2000, Rachel Neild warned

> that the clear danger of community policing is that it may be used as a tool for social control or for local *caudillos* – strongmen or "party bosses" – to maintain their dominance. Models from other contexts must be examined with these questions in mind, and issues of replicability considered carefully, particularly for a Latin American context (Neild 2000: 9).

The remaining pages of this article demonstrate that such critical warnings are indeed important components, though in most cases neglected ones, of the way things work in Latin American experiments with community policing.

2. Community Policing in Mexico City

Mexico City has recently been labeled as "a relative newcomer to the community policing philosophy" (LaRose 2006: 286). However, this view has to be corrected. Already in the 1980s, the Moral Renovation Campaign of Mexican president Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) included a project of community-oriented neighborhood policing known as *Policía de Barrio*. This project, it was hoped, would create new confidence in the police forces by promoting the image

of the police officer as "everybody's friend" (SEGOB/Presidencia 1988: 69-70). Although the existing documents and literature do not permit an appraisal of the project's success or failure, it seems that the project was eventually disregarded and finally abandoned. It was not until the beginning of the new millennium that there was a restoration of this policing effort with the revival of community policing that occurred in Mexico City, which is closely related to the local democratization process.

Whereas since 1928 the Mexican president directly appointed the Mexico City mayor, in 1997, due to constitutional changes, the local population could, for the first time in 71 years, directly elect their mayor. In this election, the majority of the residents voted for Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas from the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD). When Cárdenas was elected the mayor of Mexico City, he was expected to improve the local security situation, which the majority of the local politicians and Mexico City residents perceived as having been in a state of constant deterioration since the mid 1990s (César Kala 2000: 222-223; Davis 2006: 65; Pansters/Castillo Berthier 2007: 41). This development was widely interpreted as evidence of the failure of the security policies of the preceding *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) administrations, as well as the deficiencies of their authoritarian, abusive and highly corrupt police apparatus.

Probably the most important factor for this political success was the PRD's discursive commitment to democratization, which placed an important emphasis on citizen participation (Davis/Alvarado 2004: 136). Already during his electoral campaign, Cárdenas promised a more democratic government and a participatory governance model that would differ significantly from the decades of authoritarian politics under the PRI. This focus was clearly expressed in his campaign motto: "Juntos! Gobernaremos la ciudad" (Together! We will govern the city). A cornerstone of this effort was the introduction of the principle of effective citizen participation in local politics. According to this official democratic commitment, the local population would also receive more opportunities to participate in local security matters. This participation, in turn, was expected to contribute to a closer police-citizen relationship, which would result in a more successful fight against crime.

In this regard, the introduction of a community-policing program by the Cárdenas administration, which was expressed in the creation of the *policía comunitaria* (community police), served as the ideal strategy to combine these objectives (Davis 2003: 20). Following the official discourse, the police units of the SSPDF assigned to this program were to patrol those neighborhoods with the highest numbers of reported crimes. Through their presence in these areas, it was expected that they would contribute to the establishment of a closer and better relationship between the local population and the police, thereby rebuilding trust and confidence in the police apparatus and enhancing the capacity of the latter to fight against crime.

> To accomplish this, the SSP secretary selected the "highest-crime areas" and gave officers a three-month training course to teach them to coexist with the members of the community. Selected patrol cars and police guard stations were painted with the words "Community Police", *and that was all that was done* (Arroyo Juárez 2007: 430, emphasis added).

Notwithstanding the initial ambitious objectives, the program soon fell by the wayside in the following years. However, due to the still unresolved security and police problems, as well as the related citizen mistrust in the local police forces, this program was reinstituted and renamed a few years later under the PRD government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2000-2005). The program, formally established in 2003, was now called *Policía de Barrio*. In his inaugural speech, then-Police Chief (and current mayor of Mexico City) Marcelo Ebrard stated the centrality of re-establishing a police-citizen relationship that was based on mutual confidence and trust, and considered to be *the* essential element of local policing. The creation of the PB, modeled after similar international experiments, was to serve this purpose.

> [T]he principal instrument for combating crime is this confidence, is the support of the community for the actions of the police, and, on the other hand, the support of the police for the community. We call this program, with this ambitious goal, Policía de Barrio, because this is how the police have operated in Mexico City for a long time, and this is what has been lost for some decades for different reasons. [...] Therefore, we need to overcome this distance. This is the most important effort that we can promote as a security strategy. We can have the best equipment, but if we do not construct this bridge and this mutual support, it will be very difficult to achieve positive results. [...]. This is what the international experiences, be it of Japan, Chile, or Spain with whom we have been

working, tell us. This is what the oral traditions tell us. We did not un-
dertake a study of this topic in Mexico City, but we recall that in the
1950s and throughout most of the 1970s, the police had a very high level
of support from the community (SSPDF 2003).

As explicitly acknowledged in this speech, the reestablishment of
this program was not accompanied by an evaluation of its predeces-
sor or the structural conditions of Mexico City and its police appara-
tus. Instead, as the passage quoted demonstrates, the decision to im-
plement this program was based on what was heard from the expe-
riences of other countries, as well as on the evocation of an idyllic,
golden-age picture of the 1950s and 1960s,[2] when the population of
Mexico City was said to have had confidence in their police forces
(Arroyo Júarez 2007: 430). Despite this lack of scientific and profes-
sional evaluation, the following years saw the *Policía de Barrio* pro-
gram implemented throughout the city.

The main objective of the *Policía de Barrio* program, according
to official statements, can be identified as the (re)establishment of
confidence in the local police forces by bringing them into closer con-
tact with the local population, while making them more accountable to
the local residents by permitting the latter a voice in the evaluation
and planning of police work and strategies. These steps are perceived
as essential components of a more efficient strategy in fighting local
crime. In 2006, the *Policía de Barrio* was operating with 1,836 police
officers, drawn from the Preventive Police (about 6% of its active
members), which were assigned to 169 patrol areas characterized by
high criminal indices in 15 of the 16 boroughs of the Federal District
(SSPDF 2006: 225-226).

Since then, the basic police work of the officers assigned to this
program has been rather simple. As specified by information pro-
vided by members of the local administration of justice and local
NGOs, a pair of beat cops, whose presence and patrol turns have to
be confirmed by selected residents, is assigned to a certain patrol area
(*Código Águila*). In addition, members of the *Policía de Barrio* partic-

---

2   Such golden-age rhetoric frequently accompanies and justifies the implemen-
     tation of community policing programs. In this regard, Waddington already
     stressed in 1984 that "'Community Policing' is a romantic delusion, not for the
     'world we have lost', but for one we never had. It harks back to a harmonious
     idyll, where the police were everyone's friend. It was never thus, and it is unlike-
     ly that it will ever be" (Waddington 1984: 5).

ipate in the meetings of the local *comités vecinales* (neighborhood committees). This participation, in turn, was intended to contribute to the evaluation and reorganization of local police strategies according to the security needs of the communities.

However, although the *Policía de Barrio* is assigned to a certain area in a respective Mexico City borough, it is important to stress that neither the precinct mayors nor the local programs for crime prevention and citizen participation have direct control over the *Policía de Barrio* agents, who remain under the central authority of the SSPDF. Before detailing this fact, I will present a closer look at the neighborhood committees and their relationship to public security issues. Correspondingly, it is these institutions that are the principal instruments for citizen participation in local security issues, while also serving as the principal coordination and evaluation mechanisms for the *Policía de Barrio* (Alvarado et al. 2006: 26).

3. Community Policing in Practice: Clientelism, Mistrust and Politics

Owing to the fact that the community policing programs emphasize the crucial role of citizen participation and accountability, and because in the case of the *Policía de Barrio* the neighborhood committees are the single most important aspect in this regard, it makes sense to take the neighborhood committees as a starting point for addressing the question of how the program works in practice. When we consider the fact that the concrete legal function of the neighborhood committees with regard to their participation in local public security provision are vaguely defined,[3] this suggests that in the absence of a

---

3 The role of the neighborhood committees with regard to questions of public security were first established in Article 80 of the *Ley de Participación Ciudadana del Distrito Federal* (Law of Citizen Participation in the Federal District, LPC) passed in 1999. This article, although in rather vague and imprecise terms, states that the neighborhood committees are responsible for the "verification of public security programs". In 2004, the law was modified and the committees' role in citizen participation was redefined. It is Article 88 of the new law that defines the role of the committees to "emit opinion concerning the public security and administration of justice programs of the territorial coordinations". In addition, Article 92 states that the internal organization of the committees has to include a *Coordinación de Seguridad Ciudadana y Prevención del Delito* (Coordination for Citizen Security and Crime Prevention).

clearly defined legal function, their respective activities, as well as the resulting outcomes, depend on the existing local context together with the practices of the committee members. Taking into account the fact that the democratization of the Mexico City politics was not accompanied by the dissolution of political clientelism and paternalism that characterized the politics of the capital under the decades of PRI one-party rule (Bartra 2007: 64-69; Durand Ponte 2007; Hilgers 2008; Schütze 2005), it should come as no surprise that the activities of the neighborhood committees are also haunted by clientelistic practices (Rodríguez Luna 2007: 244-245; Zermeño/ Gutiérrez Lozano/López Aspeitia 2002: 245-251). The lasting impact of these relations can be easily identified in the realm of policing and the activities of the *Policía de Barrio*. Members of neighborhood committees as well as representatives from the local administration of justice interviewed for this study frequently stressed that in many cases the members of the neighborhood committees tend to "privatize" the *Policía de Barrio* officers assigned to their neighborhood and use them for private purposes. For example, Antonio,[4] an ex-director of a local crime prevention program, with respect to his experience with the local neighborhood committees stated:

> In reality, there was a lot of corruption going on in the subcommittees [of public security]. Members of the subcommittees had the Policía de Barrio agents practically under their private authority. They converted those police officers into private vigilantes, keeping an eye on their houses, cars, shops etcetera. All of this was highly arbitrary (interview April 2008).

Such behavior is generally tolerated by the local authorities, as it represents a crucial feature of the practices of informal negotiations or *gestiones* that still stand at the heart of Mexico City politics: in exchange for the delivery of services to local residents, the latter offer political support to people capable of providing these services. However, this relationship is frequently mediated through local brokers or intermediaries. Their power is based on political capital derived from their capacity to mobilize people. This in turn enables them to function as informal spokesmen of local level collective in-

---

4   As many people interviewed for this article explicitly asked me not to be cited with their names, I decided to use anonymous names for all interviewees as well as fictitious names throughout the text.

terests and to present these interests to state authorities. This position provides such brokers with a privileged access to state personnel and resources that they can then appropriate, to a certain degree, for their private and political purposes (Hilgers 2008: 137; Müller 2012). The following passage from the interview with Antonio offers an inside view of these practices and their pervasiveness within the context of Mexico City politics:

> Yes, this system obviously produces a vice of certain privileged relationships, but this goes on everywhere. There are certain personalities, certain groups, which manage to establish a direct relationship with some public official and, well, this opens the door to a more expedient path. For example, we have a good relationship with Manuel, a local member of congress. When the people asked for more light on one street, well what did we do? We asked the people to send a request to the person responsible for the sector [*jefe del sector*], the local chief of public security. But this is nothing more than a formality. We picked up the phone, called the person responsible for the sector, whom we know and who is familiar with our relationship with Manuel, and, well: "Listen chief, these people need these things. When can we meet to speak about this with you personally?" And, well, isn't it great that things can be taken care of so easily? What we do, and this is completely within the same logic, is take advantage of a privileged contact in order to solve a concrete problem.

In such a context, the political and legal nature of the neighborhood committees creates ideal circumstances for the concentration of these practices of negotiation, while establishing privileged spaces for the arbitrary appropriation and distribution of public security resources for private and political purposes. Against this background, it is not surprising that when Pamela, a local member of a neighborhood committee in the middle-class neighborhood of Coyoacán, was asked what the police do in order to improve the local security situation, she replied: "Well, of course they'll send me officers, because I have the phone number of the local police chief [*jefe del sector*]. I call him, they come" (interview September 2007).

Such forms of privileged access to and the private appropriation of public security resources, however, are not exclusively the domain of neighborhood committees in middle-class districts. For example, Rodrigo, a shopkeeper and former member of a neighborhood committee in the marginalized Mexico City borough of Iztapalapa, explained that during the time he was active in the

neighborhood committee he organized other shopkeepers in his area to collect money to be passed on to the local *Policía de Barrio* officers to keep an eye on their stores and have "a little bit more surveillance out here" (interview November 2007).

Under such conditions, it is evident that the evaluation of the work of the *Policía de Barrio* by the neighborhood committees, as well as the resulting police-community relations, may often be based more on the neighborhood committee members' personal interests than on the security concerns of the entire community. In general, local members of the administration of justice and NGO activists remained skeptical, when taking into account the political history and fixed influence of clientelism and local political bossism into broader political structures, if the neighborhood committees could be expected to function as authentic representative bodies of the respective neighborhood as well as efficient institutions for the accountability of the *Policía de Barrio*. This absence of real accountability mechanisms perpetuates the institutional problems of the local police forces, such as informality or involvement in criminal and corrupt practices (on these topics, see Davis 2006; Martínez de Murguía 1999; Müller 2012), thereby making the expected positive impact on police-community relations, as well as the positive contribution to the local security situation, questionable.

However, it is important to stress that the informal privatization of the *Policía de Barrio* and the resulting fragmentation of their security provision is not limited to the activities of the neighborhood committees. Rather, *Policía de Barrio* officers can be "appropriated" by a broad variety of actors, ranging from shopkeepers to ordinary citizens. Although, the neighborhood committees undeniably have privileged access to the *Policía de Barrio* agents, this privilege does not imply exclusivity. In the local context where the majority of police officers opted for employment with law enforcement out of an interest in "making money" (Arteaga Botello/López Rivera 2000), "buying" private protection from the police is a rather common phenomenon (Müller 2012: chapter 3; Pansters/Castillo Berthier 2007: 45; Anozie et al. 2004: 4), and the *Policía de Barrio* seems to be no exception in this regard. Accordingly, Marcos, a member of a local NGO, explained that in prosperous zones of the Federal District members of the local population would "donate" money to the *Policía de*

Barrio officers, who, motivated by these financial incentives, in turn showed a greater and more regular presence in these areas than in more marginalized zones. This suggests that money-driven market logic also negatively affects the quality of the local community policing effort and contribute to a high degree of spatial selectivity and geographical fragmentation (interview March 2006).

The informal appropriation of police officers is not the only problem related to the activities of the *Policía de Barrio*. Other features include arbitrary and criminal behavior that frequently contribute to widespread negative perceptions of the *Policía de Barrio* program. For example, Rafa, a shopkeeper in the middle-class neighborhood Colonia del Valle explained that although the *Policía de Barrio* officers assigned to the zone have a clearly defined patrol area and schedule, in practice, the agents show up whenever they want. Although in theory their patrols have to be individually confirmed after their completion by selected local residents, in practice, he, in his function as such a controller, has been frequently "asked" by the local *Policía de Barrio* agents to confirm all of their patrols for the entire day at one time. After they received his signature, the agents would not return for the rest of the day to continue with their patrols. These facts, according to this shopkeeper, seriously undermine not only the efficiency but also the credibility of the program (interview September 2006).

A further element that appears to discredit local implementations of the *Policía de Barrio* program was mentioned in an analysis by the NGO *Democracia, Derechos Humanos y Seguridad* of neighborhood reactions towards insecurity problems. The authors referred to an incidence in the marginalized Mexico City borough of Iztapalapa, in which the residents mentioned that the local *Policía de Barrio* agents are involved in extorting local residents and delinquents (Alvarado et al. n.d.: 29). For that reason, a spokesman of a local business organization in the middle-class borough of Coyoacán declared that after having been informed by local authorities about their plans to assign *Policía de Barrio* units to patrol his residential zone, he as well as other members of the organization vehemently, and successfully, rejected this proposal. This refusal was based on fears that the permanent presence of and monitoring by *Policía de Barrio* agents would permit the latter to gather sensitive information concerning the daily routines of the residents and, therefore, taking in-

to account the bad reputation of the local police forces and their frequent connections to organized crime, would represent a serious security risk for them and their families (interview December 2007). However, as the following interview passages demonstrate, members of the lower social classes and marginalized segments of the local population have equally negative views of the *Policía de Barrio*, albeit for different reasons. For example, Rebecca, a sex worker working in downtown Mexico City, stated:

> Preventive Police, Policía de Barrio, Judicial Police, that doesn't make a big difference. Customers are a problem, most of all, when they refuse to pay, but the authorities represent another risk for us. They try to extort us. When you refuse to pay, they take you to the *delegación*, where they can keep you for 24 hours without any possibility of making a phone call. They tell you that you have been arrested for committing a crime. To achieve a good relationship with the police, you have to give them the money they want and everything else they ask you to. There are a lot of colleagues that had to enter into a sexual relationship with a policeman (interview October 2006).

In addition, Héctor, a resident from the marginalized Mexico City neighborhood of Iztapalapa, mentioned that due to the behavior of *Policía de Barrio* officers in his neighborhood, local residents perceive them as an aggressive presence in the area. This is highlighted in the following interview:

> [There] is a program that they call Policía de Barrio, where you have police officers who walk around and keep an eye on the neighborhood, but in reality they are not very efficient, because when the people here see eight police officers walking around, they perceive this as an aggression. It's not that the Policía de Barrio officers show up and talk colloquial with, let's say an old woman, as friends [*cuates*]. No, when they come, they are very indifferent to what's going on here. So with this attitude they will never be able to integrate with the community.

> You just said that the Policía de Barrio operates here with groups of eight people?

> Policía de Barrio... yes, yes.

> Well, in other neighborhoods I was told that there are only two police officers on patrol. Here it seems that this is somehow different?

> Yes! And they don't show up every day. Sometimes they come once in a week, sometimes every two weeks. Policía de Barrio... Yes... Here are some police posts [módulos de vigilancia] that belong to the citizen participation program. In these posts there's sometimes a Policía de Barrio officer, but this guy locks himself up in his post. So, he is safe, but in

> the street before him, there's no security. There's no security because he is inside his post and doesn't make his patrols. When they finally go on patrol, well then always in a group of many, and the people here have an aggressive view about this (interview September 2007).

However, it seems that such perceptions of mistrust, mentioned by Héctor, are not one-sided but are instead mutual. As Carlos, a local policeman from the same borough, explained, due to the prevailing lack of confidence in the police by the local residents in his patrol area he would prefer not to make his patrols on foot, as required by the *Policía de Barrio* program, in order to avoid problems with the residents. Instead, he uses a police car for collecting the signatures for the *Código Águila* (interview March 2008).

Against the background of the aforementioned observations, it is of little surprise that Fernando, an instructor of the *Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Penales* (National Institute for the Study of Criminal Science), a public agency that offers training for public servants involved in the prosecution and administration of justice, gave the following description of nearly six years of community policing in Mexico City:

> The only thing the SSPDF has done was to put more police on the streets. More police presence on the streets of certain neighborhoods. This has nothing to do with approaching the citizens. There is no direct contact with the citizens. All they do is give the policemen a paper with which they go to the store and ask the clerk for a signature, they go the pharmacy and do the same, they go the beauty salon and ask the owner for a signature. This is what the Policía de Barrio is all about for them (interview December 2009).

This outcome, in addition to the abovementioned problems of clientelism and police corruption, which according to the involved interview partners are well known by the respective authorities, raises the question why this program continues to be presented and actively promoted by the local government and the SSPDF as a key strategy for addressing the security demands of the local citizens. Ramón, who works for a local crime prevention program, gave a possible and convincing explanation of this paradox. He explained that the creation of the *Policía de Barrio* program should not be interpreted as a serious commitment to establishing citizen participation in security issues. Rather, it represents the symbolic intent to demonstrate a political will to improve the local security situation in

a democratic way, and to express sensitivity to the respective demands of the local civil society by avoiding the transformation of the traditional structure of the local Preventive Police. This permits a kind of illusory decentralization by maintaining central political control over the local police apparatus at a time when local politics are marked by growing inner-party rivalries between the different factions of the PRD (interview July 2007). In a similar vein, Antonio, introduced above, stated:

> In the end, there is no interest in converting public security into something more closely related to the community. There is an interest, a necessity, and a decision for control. They [the government of the Federal District] are convinced that this is something necessary, and because of this, they are not interested in participation or even at the very least in dialogue with the community. The police in Mexico are very corrupt, and because of this, I think that there is no will from the government of the Federal District to resolve these problems. This is why they don't want better local control and supervision. With a centralized police structure, the control of the corrupt superiors over their agents in the Federal District is much more efficient (interview April 2008).

In this respect, NGO activists and members from the local administration of justice interviewed for this study indicated that the *Policía de Barrio* projects reflect a more general development in the realm of local policing, a development which can be described as "symbolic policing". In Mexico City, local authorities increasingly tend to address security problems and critical issues in the local law enforcement agencies without a serious commitment to structural reforms. They are instead concerned with publicly visible and displayable measures, such as the acquisition of new, more fashionable uniforms, new equipment, or the creation of new police units. The increasing attractiveness of such forms of symbolic policing, as the interviews indicated, is closely related to the local democratization process, the pluralization and competition among local and national political actors, as well as the resulting politization of security issues in Mexico City. Leaving aside political conflicts between the local city government (PRD) and the federal government (first PRI, later the *Partido Acción Naciona*l, the National Action Party, PAN), this politization is also reflected inside the governing structure of Mexico City, although being more evident at the level of the boroughs. Here, internal factionalism within the dominant party (PRD) frequently de-

termines not only the supply and security equipment assigned to specific boroughs, it also impedes a further decentralization of policing faculties and the creation of impartial accountability structures at this administrative level. This is due to the fact that the government of Mexico City prefers a centralized police structure that can more easily facilitate the maintenance, and image, of a certain degree of control over the local public security apparatus. However, in order to demonstrate their commitment to democracy and citizen concerns, which exist in a political conjuncture where security problems rank among the most important political issues in local opinion polls, local politicians tend to create seemingly "innovative" and "progressive" police units and programs (on the historical roots of this pattern of "symbolic policing", see Davis 2012). These programs, however, due to their fixed influence in the prevailing political context, coupled with the absence of serious political will for a structural police reform effort, are in many cases a failure by design. Therefore, such efforts like the *Policía de Barrio*, "may serve for show as much as for anything else" (Davis/Alvarado 2004: 149).

4. Conclusion

The active participation of citizens in the provision of public security through the implementation of community policing programs has become an important urban policing strategy in contemporary Latin America, which is actively promoted by local politicians, NGOs, national and international think tanks, and academics. This support is in large part due to the assumed potential of this "international best practice" to contribute to a more efficient, democratic and accountable policing, as well as to improve citizen-police relations. This article presented a critical analysis of a Mexico City community-policing program: the *Policía de Barrio* project. By confronting the officially stated goals and objectives of this community policing program, with the community policing practices on "the ground", this article demonstrated that the experiences in Mexico City significantly differ from the widespread positive expectations regarding the democratic potential of community policing programs and their contribution to improving citizen-police relations.

First, the Mexico City case study demonstrated that the local community policing efforts are overdetermined by established structures of clientelism and police corruption that permit and facilitate the private appropriation/distribution of community policing resources for private purposes. Second, the case study also showed that the program's contribution to an improvement of citizen-police relations is doubtful. Far from finding a harmonious cooperation between police and citizens or contribution to a mutual beneficial co-production of security, descriptions of illegal and abusive conduct from *Policía de Barrio* officers were encountered, as well as strong sentiments of mutual mistrust between community policing officers and local residents. Finally, the findings of this article stress the centrality and negative impact of politics. The abovementioned observations suggest that the *Policía de Barrio* program should most of all be interpreted as an effort of "symbolic policing" aimed at the public. Furthermore, the program can be regarded as a discursive display of an "authentic" commitment to citizen participation and to democratization, without a real political will to confront the structural problems of the local police forces or to enhance police accountability.

Whereas these findings from Mexico City already question the predominant positive evaluation with which the advocates of community policing programs in Latin America promote the introduction of such policing models, there are at least two additional factors that deserve attention. First, it should be recalled that when Rudolph Giuliani was contracted by influential actors of the Mexico City business community in order to develop an export version of his zero tolerance policing approach,[5] he initiated a report containing 146 recommendations to the authorities – all of which were accepted by the SSPDF – and explicitly referred to the *Policía de Barrio* program (recommendation 127) as a crucial component for an improvement of the "quality of life" in Mexico City (SSPDF 2003). As Alex Vitale has convincingly argued, the "quality of life" paradigm and the related policing focus on the "recuperation of public spaces", which is a central theme in most other Latin American cities today, are fundamental features of more repressive policing schemes, such as the

---

5   On Giuliani's activities in Mexico City, see Müller (2009) and Davis (2007).

initial zero tolerance policing approach advocated in New York City
(Vitale 2008). When further recalling that even leading scholars in
the field of criminology classify zero tolerance policing as a com-
munity policing effort (Johnston/Shearing 2003: chapter 6), then
there should be more skepticism about the widely assumed "onto-
logical" emancipative and democratic potential of community polic-
ing projects.

Second, it is striking that most of the current research on com-
munity policing in Latin America treats the notion of "community"
as unproblematic. The fact that the local is not necessarily a privi-
leged place for democratic empowerment is obvious in the case
study of Mexico City. This insight receives additional support from
a recent study on community policing in Buenos Aires. This study
demonstrates not only the selective participation of the local resi-
dents, but also stresses that the people participating in these pro-
grams frequently have a repressive vision of crime prevention that
predominantly focuses on the eviction of homosexuals, prostitutes or
adolescents drinking in the streets of their neighborhood. In this re-
spect, the analysis demonstrates that the local community policing
initiatives perpetuate existing power relations inside the communi-
ties together with the resulting processes of social and spatial exclu-
sion, rather than overcoming such divides (Feth 2008). As Graham
Ellison observed, this outcome and the related neglect of inner-
community relations of power by the community policing advocates
represents "the most fundamental weakness" of community policing
because it

> assumes the existence of a relatively homogeneous community with
> shared values about the role of the police, a functioning civil society
> and the absence of serious ethnic, class, religious and ideological fis-
> sures.

It, therefore, assumes or presupposes a situation that

> is simply not the case in many transitional contexts (Ellison 2007: 208).

Against this background, the present paper should be read as a call
for empirical studies on community policing efforts in Latin America
that are more sensitive to the fixed influence of such policing im-
ports into wider socio-political relations and local "cultures of con-

trol". In fact, in Latin America, as well as in other regions of the so-called "developing world",

> most of the analyses relevant to policing are driven by today's policy requirements, or are rooted in an uncritical liberalism; nuanced theoretical analyses are missing, as are ethnographic studies (Hills 2009: 212).

In order to overcome the resulting shortcomings, future research should try to address these topics by moving beyond the "excessive formalism" (O'Donnell 2006: 287), which haunts most of the related studies and their frequently apolitical and decontextualized treatment of security and policing issues in contemporary Latin American cities.

References

Alvarado, Arturo/Martínez, Olivia/Torres, Amparo/Urusquieta, M. Ulises (2006): *Respuestas Vecinales a la Inseguridad Pública en la Ciudad de México*. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Latin American Program Special Report, 24-29 (<www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/LAP_August.pdf>; 22.10.2007).

— (n.d.): *Respuestas Vecinales a la Inseguridad Pública en la Ciudad de México*. México, D.F.: Democracia, Derechos Humanos y Seguridad, A. C.

Anozie, Valentina/Shinn, Juhie/Skarlatos, Katy/Urzua, Julio (2004): *Reducing Incentives for Corruption in the Mexico City Police Force*. International Workshop, Public Affairs 869 (<www.lafollette.wisc.edu/publications/workshops/2003-2004/pa869/2004-MEXICO.pdf>; 12.01.2007).

Arroyo Juárez, M. (2007): "Evaluating the Zero Tolerance Strategy and its Application in Mexico City". In: Cornelius, Wayne/Shirk, David (eds.): *Reforming the Administration of Justice in Mexico*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 415-438.

Arteaga Botello, Nelson/López Rivera, Adrián (2000): "Everything in This Job is Money: Inside the Mexican Police". In: *World Policy Journal*, 17, 3, pp. 61-70.

Bartra, Roger (2007): *Fango sobre la democracia. Textos polémicos sobre la transición Mexicana*. México, D.F.: Planeta Mexicana.

Bogner, Alexander/Littig, Beate/Menz, Wolfgang (eds.) (2005): *Das Experteninterview. Theorie, Methode, Anwendung*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Brogden, Mike (2002): "Implementing Community Policing in South Africa: A Failure of History, of Context, and of Theory". In: *Liverpool Law Review*, 24, pp. 157-218.

Brogden, Mike/Nijhar, Preeti (2005): *Community Policing. National and International Models and Approaches*. Portland: Willan.

Buvinić, Mayra/Alda, Erik/Lamas, Jorge (2005): *Emphasizing Prevention in Citizen Security. The Inter-American Development Bank's Contribution to Reducing Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Best Practices Series). Washington, D.C.: Inter-American Development Bank.

Castillo, José (2008): "After the Explosion". In: Burdett, Ricky/Sudjic, Deyan (eds.): *The Endless City*. London: Phaidon, pp. 174-185.

César Kala, Julio (2000): "Fenomenología del Delito: Diagnóstico de la Criminalidad en el Distrito Federal". In: *Diálogo y Debate de Cultura Política*, 3, 12, pp. 214-228.

Dammert, Lucía (ed.) (2004): *Seguridad Ciudadana. Experiencias y Desafíos*. Valparaíso: FLACSO.

Dammert, Lucía/Malone, Mary Fran T. (2006): "Does It Take a Village? Policing Strategies and Fear of Crime in Latin America". In: *Latin American Politics and Society*, 48, 4, pp. 27-51.

Davis, Diane E. (2003): "Law Enforcement in Mexico: Not yet under Control". In: *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 37, 2, pp. 17-24.

— (2006): "Undermining the Rule of Law: Democratisation and the Dark Side of Police Reform in Mexico". In: *Latin American Politics and Society*, 48, 1, pp. 55-86.

— (2007): "El factor Giuliani: delincuencia, la "cero tolerancia" en el trabajo policiaco y la transformación de la esfera pública en el centro de la ciudad de México". In: *Estudios Sociológicos*, XXV: 75, pp. 639-668.

— (2012): "Policing and Mexican Regime Change: From Post-Authoritarianism to Populism to Neo-Liberalism". In: Pansters, Wil (ed.): *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 68-90.

Davis, Diane E./Alvarado, Arturo (2004): "Mexico City: The Challenge of Political Transition". In: Chavez, Daniel/Goldfrank, Benjamin (eds.): *The Left in the City. Participatory Local Governments in Latin America*. London: Latin American Bureau, pp. 135-168.

Durand Ponte, Victor Manuel (2007): "Gobiernos de izquierda y democracia: ciudadanos o clients". In: Bartra, Roger (ed.): *Izquierda, Democracia y Crisis Política en México*. México, D.F.: Nuevo Horizonte, pp. 151-164.

Eilbaum, Lucía (2004): "La policía 'al servicio de la comunidad': tradición policial y vientos de cambio". In: Tiscornia, Sofía (ed.): *Burocracias y violencia. Estudios de antropología juridical*. Buenos Aires: Antropofagia, pp. 159-201.

Ellison, Graham (2007): "Fostering a Dependency Culture: The Commodification of Community Policing in a Global Marketplace". In: Goldsmith, Andrew/Sheptycki, James (eds.): *Crafting Transnational Policing. Police Capacity-Building and Global Policing Reform*. Oxford: Hart, pp. 203-242.

Feth, Anja (2008): "Viel Lärm um nichts? Kommunale Kriminalprävention in Buenos Aires". In: La Rosa, Sybille de/Höppner, Ulrike/Kötter, Matthias (eds.): *Transdisziplinäre Governanceforschung. Gemeinsam hinter den Staat blicken*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 230-250.

Feth, Anja/Müller, Markus-Michael (2009): *Security Governance between Failure, Symbolic Legitimation and Informality: Lessons from Latin America's Metropolis*. Berlin: Mimeo.

Föhrig, Alberto/Pomares, Julia S./Gortari, Cecilia (2006): "Citizen Security Policy in Argentina: The National Crime Prevention Plan". In: Tulchin, Joseph S./Ruthenburg, Meg (eds.): *Toward a Society under Law. Citizens and their Police in Latin America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 243-260.

Frühling, Hugo (ed.) (2004): *Calles más seguras. Estudios de policía comunitaria en América Latina*. Washington, D.C.: Inter-American Development Bank.

Garland, David (2001): *The Culture of Control. Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Glebbeek, Marie-Louise (2010): "*Mano Dura*: Fighting Crime, Violence, and Insecurity with an Iron Fist in Central America". In: Kuhns, Joseph B./Knutsson, Johannes (eds.): *Police Use of Force: A Global Perspective*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, pp. 63-72.

Herbert, Steve (2001): "Policing the Contemporary City: Fixing Broken Windows or Shoring Up Neo-Liberalism". In: *Theoretical Criminology*, 5, 4, pp. 445-466.

— (2006): *Citizens, Cops, and Power: Recognizing the Limits of Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hilgers, Tina (2008): "Causes and Consequences of Political Clientelism: Mexico's PRD in Comparative Perspective". In: *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50, 4, pp. 123-153.

Hills, Alice (2009): *Policing Post-Conflict Cities*. London: Zed Books.

IBRD (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) (2008): *Urban Crime and Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean. Status Report on Activities*. Washington, D.C.: IBRD.

Johnston, Les/Shearing, Clifford (2003): *Governing Security*. London: Routledge.

Koonings, Kees/Kruijt, Dirk (eds.) (2007): *Fractured Cities. Social Exclusion, Urban Violence and Contested Spaces in Latin America*. London: Zed Books.

LaRose, Anthony P. (2006): "Individual Values of Mexico's New Centurions: Will Police Recruits Implement Community-Based Changes?". In: *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 22, 4, pp. 286-302.

Lau, Raymond W. K. (2004): "Community Policing in Hong Kong: Transplanting a Questionable Model". In: *Criminal Justice*, 4, 1, pp. 61-80.

Martínez de Murguía, Beatriz (1999): *La Policía en México: ¿Orden social o criminalidad?* México, D.F.: Planeta.

Mayring, Philipp (2008): *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlage und Techniken*. Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag.

Müller, Markus-Michael (2009): "Wenn 'Null Toleranz' und 'Zerbrochene Fensterscheiben' auf Reisen gehen: Globalisierung und die Restrukturierung des historischen Zentrums in Mexiko Stadt". In: *Kriminologisches Journal*, 41, 2, pp. 82-99.

— (2012): *Public Security in the Negotiated State. Policing in Latin America and Beyond*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Murphy, Christopher (2007): "The Chart before the Horse: Community Oriented versus Professional Models of International Police Reform". In: Goldsmith, Andrew/Sheptycki, James (eds.): *Crafting Transnational Policing. Police Capacity-Building and Global Policing Reform*. Oxford: Hart, pp. 243-262.

Neild, Rachel (2000): *Themes and Debates in Public Security Reform. A Manual for Civil Society: Community Policing*. Washington, D.C., Washington Office on Latin America.

O'Donnell, Guillermo (2006): "On Informal Institutions, Once Again". In: Helmke, Gretchen/Levitsky, Steven (eds.): *Informal Institutions & Democracy. Lessons from Latin America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 285-290.

Pansters, Wil/ and Castillo Berthier, Hector (2007): "Mexico City". In: Koonings, Kees/Kruijt, Dirk (eds.): *Fractured Cities. Social Exclusion, Urban Violence & Contested Spaces in Latin America*. London: Zed Books, pp. 36-56.

Rodríguez Luna, Ricardo (2007): "La participación de la ciudadanía en la prevención del delito: estudio de caso en la ciudad de México". In: González Placencia, Luis/ Arce Aguilar, José Luis/Álvarez, Metztli (eds.): *Aproximaciones empíricas al estudio de la inseguridad. Once estudios en materia de seguridad ciudadana en México*. México, D.F.: Porrúa, pp. 225-253.

Rotker, Susan (ed.) (2002): *Citizens of Fear. Urban Violence in Latin America*. Camden: Rutgers University Press.

Ruteree, Mutuma/Pommerolle, Marie-Emanuelle (2003): "Democratizing Security or Decentralizing Repression? The Ambiguities of Community Policing in Kenya". In: *African Affairs*, 102/409, pp. 587-604.

SEGOB (Secretaría de Gobernación)/Presidencia de la República (1988): *Justicia y Seguridad. Cuadernos de Renovación Moral*. México, D.F.

SSPDF (Secretaría de Seguridad Pública del Distrito Federal) (2003): Discurso del Secretario de Seguridad Pública del DF, Marcelo Ebrard Casubon, durante la presentación de la Policía de Barrio en la Plaza de Constitución (<www. prodigyweb.net.mx/comunicacion0303/htm/dis_20-03-03.htm>; 21.05.2006).

— (2006): *Memoria Institucional 2000-2006*. México, D.F.

— (2009): *Seguridad: A TU ALCANCE*. México, D.F.

Schütze, Stephanie (2005): *Die andere Seite der Demokratisierung. Die Veränderungen politischer Kultur aus der Perspektive der sozialen Bewegung der Siedlerinnen von Santo Domingo, Mexiko-Stadt*. Berlin: Tranvía.

Sozzo, Máximo (2005): "Metamorfosis de los discursos y las prácticas sobre seguridad urbana en la Argentina". In: Dammert, Lucía/Bailey, John (eds.): *Seguridad y reforma policial en las Américas. Experiencias y desafíos*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, pp. 39-57.

Stanley, Ruth (2006): "The Globalisation of 'Democratic' Policing. Community Policing as an Export Model". In: Costa, Sérgio/Domingues, José Maurício/ Knöbl, Wolfgang/Pereira da Silva, Josué (eds.): *The Plurality of Modernity. Decentring Sociology,* München: Hampp, pp. 87-98.

Vitale, Alex S. (2008): *City of Disorder. How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York Politics*. New York: New York University Press.

Wacquant, Loïc (2009): *Punishing the Poor. The Neoliberal Governmentof Social Insecurity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Waddington, Peter A. J. (1984) "Community Policing: A Sceptical Appraisal". In: Norton, Philip (ed.): *Law and Order and British Politics*. Aldershot: Gower, pp. 84-96.

— (1999): *Policing Citizens: Authority and Rights*. London: UCL.

Zermeño, Sergio/Gutiérrez Lozano, Saúl/López Aspeitia, Luis Ernesto (2002): "La democracia impertinente: Comités vecinales en una cultura estatal". In: *Revista mexicana de Sociología*, 64, 1, pp. 231-268.