

Policyweekly

Police Accountability: Bridging the Gap Between Public Trust and Law Enforcement in Nigeria



Policy Recommendations

- 1** There is a need to strengthen oversight mechanisms through independent bodies to investigate and prosecute police misconduct.
- 2** Comprehensive training programs focusing on human rights, ethics, and community-oriented policing should be implemented.
- 3** There is a need to leverage technology for enhanced accountability.
- 4** It is important for collaboration between the public and CSOs to sustain accountability initiatives.

Introduction

Police accountability forms one of the bedrock and pillars of any functional democracy. Based on this, law enforcement agencies must work within the dictates of the rule of law and respect citizens' rights. In Nigeria, adherence to the above tenets of democracy is lacking and nearly impossible to achieve. As a result, public confidence in the ability of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) by citizens has remained low due to widespread reports of corruption, brutality, and impunity by members of the Force. The police have also been further denied their sovereignty and independence through long years of military rule, lack of investment in policing, and lack of elite consensus on the need for a functional police. Entrenched loss of confidence and historical and structural weaknesses in the NPF form an enormous challenge to public safety and governance in the country.

The Nigeria Police Force, inherited from the colonial era and reformed for decades, still grapples with deep-seated structural and operational deficiencies. While accountability mechanisms, such as the Police Service Commission (PSC) and its internal disciplinary units, exist on paper, their actual effectiveness, to say the least, remains questionable. The #EndSARS protests, among other high-profile incidents, cast a spotlight on systemic issues of police misconduct and underlined the dire need for comprehensive reforms. This edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly

analyses Nigeria's police accountability crisis, exploring systemic failures, public mistrust, and the impact of corruption while advocating reforms like transparency, training, and community collaboration to rebuild trust and effectiveness.

Hurdles to Police Accountability

There are numerous challenges to police accountability in Nigeria. Institutional weaknesses, corruption, impunity, inadequate training, and judicial bottlenecks combine to create a dysfunctional system. Oversight bodies like the PSC and the Ministry of Police Affairs lack the autonomy and resources to enforce meaningful accountability. Internal disciplinary systems are often opaque, leading to perceptions of leniency and ineffectiveness. Allegations of corruption within the force further compound these problems, as impunity for misconduct—which includes extortion, extrajudicial killings, and unlawful detention—continues to erode public confidence. Political interference frequently undermines investigations and disciplinary actions, reinforcing a culture of mistrust. There is also legislative oversight, which is very important in every democracy. However, in Nigeria, due to political interference issues and the Nigerian state's prebendal nature, that aspect of oversight is very often underplayed.

The issue of inadequate training and resources is another critical area of concern. The NPF is underfunded, with limited access to modern policing tools and facilities. Compared to the United States, which boasts a standard police force, [the stark contrast in funding and equipment](#) between the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) and U.S. police departments significantly affects their respective capabilities. The NPF grapples with severe financial limitations, undermining their ability to acquire modern equipment essential for effective policing. To address this, Kwen (2020) stated that the Nigerian government established the Police Trust Fund, aiming to bolster funding through levies on companies; however, this initiative still falls short of meeting the comprehensive needs of the force. Also, Training programs often fail to emphasise human rights, ethics, and community-oriented policing, leaving officers ill-equipped to address the complex needs of the populations they serve. [The comparative deficiency](#) can also be seen when compared to the United States Police, where officers benefit from comprehensive training regimes that include continuous professional development and opportunities for specialisation. This structured approach to training, as noted by Nwoko & Osiki (2016), ensures a higher level of competency in diverse policing tasks, from routine patrol duties to crisis management, which in turn supports more

effective community policing and adherence to professional standards.

Public perception plays a significant role in shaping the relationship between the police and the communities they serve. Incidents of police brutality and corruption have deeply damaged the public's trust in the NPF. [International human rights organisations](#), including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have documented extensive police misconduct in Nigeria, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, abductions, and illegal detention (Campbell, 2019; Amnesty International, 2020; Cheatham and Maizland, 2022). Also, when officers act within the bounds of the law, their actions are often viewed with suspicion due to a history of misconduct. The recent arrest of prominent figure and lawyer Dele Farotimi is a case in point. Despite citing the prevention of public disorder as the reason for the method of the arrest, the police's handling of the situation was met with [widespread criticism](#), reflecting the entrenched distrust of law enforcement motives and methods. Misinformation, mainly through social media, further exacerbates these challenges, distorting public perceptions and undermining trust.

Efforts to Improve Police Accountability

Efforts to improve police accountability have been ongoing but inconsistent. The Nigerian government's response to the #EndSARS protests included the [establishment of judicial panels](#) to investigate police misconduct. While these panels brought some measure of justice to victims, their [implementation has been largely absent](#), limiting their overall impact. Oversight agencies such as the Police Service Commission (PSC) and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) have made strides in promoting accountability, yet systemic challenges persist. For instance, the former Inspector-General of Police IGP Mr Musiliu Smith, identified that the Commission had been faced with a lot of [challenges](#) ranging from a shortage of required resources, inadequate manpower, ill-equipped training facilities, and re-training of personnel facilities, which had all hindered it from satisfactorily discharging its functions effectively. Civil society organisations have played a crucial role in documenting abuses and advocating for reforms, keeping the issue of police accountability at the forefront of public discourse.

Recommendations

To bridge the gap between public trust and law enforcement, there is a need for:

- 1. Strengthening oversight mechanisms is paramount:** The agencies must be independent and given the authority to investigate and prosecute police misconduct without fear of political interference. Such agencies should be adequately funded and insulated from external pressures to function effectively. Transparency is another critical element: mandating public reporting about police operations and disciplinary actions can help rebuild confidence in the system. Setting up accessible platforms for citizens to report misconduct anonymously would further enhance accountability.
- 2. Enhancing training and capacity building:** Equally important is improving training and capacity building. In-depth training programs on human rights, ethics, and community-oriented policing should be undertaken. Better resources and incentives for officers improve morale and reduce temptations toward corrupt practices. Community engagement is another avenue to foster trust and cooperation. Community police forums, frequent town hall meetings, and joint problem-solving initiatives could help to break the ice and gap between the community and police. Including community members within oversight mechanisms will also ensure policing is responsive to concerns and priorities raised by the members.
- 3. Leveraging technology for enhanced accountability:** Technological advances offer new ways to improve accountability in law enforcement. Equipping officers with body-worn cameras and secure systems for storing and analysing the recorded footage may provide objective documentation of police

encounters. Using data analytics and artificial intelligence to track misconduct trends can help identify pervasive problems and inform policy formulation.

- 4. Collaboration between the public and CSOs for sustaining accountability initiatives:** Citizens and civil society play a critical role in monitoring accountability. Through activism, reporting, and involvement, citizens hold law enforcement agencies accountable for what they do. Civil society organisations provide crucial oversight and documentation of abuses and advocate for policies favouring victims. Collective efforts between the public and these organisations are essential for sustaining accountability initiatives and ensuring that reforms translate into tangible improvements.

Conclusion

Police accountability is an indispensable prerequisite for rebuilding public confidence and effective law enforcement in Nigeria. The much-needed reform of the Nigerian police can, therefore, be undertaken with a strengthened mechanism for oversight, increased transparency, better training, and collaboration with the community. This long-term process requires political will, continuous funding, and collective commitment toward justice, openness, and accountability. It will, however, require concerted efforts by all governments, civil society, and the public for a reformed, accountable Nigerian Police Force to become a reality. Meeting these challenges is not just a task before the police; it is the task of the nation to uphold democracy, justice, and the rule of law.

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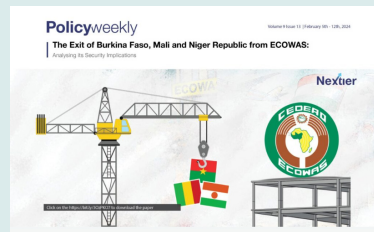
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