



Combatting Mob Justice: An Overview

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Table of Contents

What is Mob Justice?	3
A Picture of Mob Justice	4
How to Combat Mob Justice	5
What GCI is Doing.....	7
Conclusion	8

What is Mob Justice?

Mob justice (sometimes called “Jungle Justice”), refers to the act of a group of people taking the law into their own hands and enacting violent justice on an alleged criminal. This type of justice is, while not an every day occurrence, regrettably common in Cameroon, in the urban areas, but especially in the more rural areas where there is less of a police presence.

At first glance, it is easy for most people to see why mob justice is wrong: it violates a person’s right to a fair trial (Article 10 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and right to be innocent until proven guilty (not only stated as article 11, but also viable in all areas that use a Common Law system, including Anglophone Cameroon). Without a trial in an official court of law, it is all too easy to hurt or kill a person without proof of their guilt.

Mob justice perpetuates a cycle of violence, creates a culture of fear, and rejects personal accountability for violent acts that are committed in the name of justice. As we condemn the act of mob justice, it is important to understand the social climate that allows for it to happen. Mob justice is a result of a severe lack of faith in local police forces and judicial systems. Many villages in Cameroon—especially those in rural areas—do not have a police presence. If, indeed, the police are called on an issue, even if it is a violent and urgent crime, it can take days for them to come, if they ever arrive. This lack of competency, due primarily to the country’s underfunded and understaffed law enforcement system, forces people to believe that justice only comes through their own hands.



A victim of mob justice in Cameroon, 2009
Source:NewsRescue!

A Picture of Mob Justice

An example of mob justice in Cameroon comes from one of GCI's partner villages. During October of 2011, there was a violent assault against an old man in the village. He was living alone, but had a family member who had recently returned from Europe, arousing speculation that the thieves suspected that there was money in the house. Four men came to the village at night and brutally attacked the man and ransacked his house. They didn't find any money and left him severely wounded. The vigilante group was alerted at the time of the crime and arranged themselves at the bottom of the road leading out of the village, surprising the men who were pushing their motorcycles down the road on their way out, so as not to make noise. The vigilante group fired guns at the men, who ran into the bush, leaving their motorcycles. The amount of blood found in the bush by the vigilante group lead them to believe that they had hit at least one of the men, but they didn't find a body.

All of the thieves escaped, and the village kept their motorcycles. The chief said that the police never came up to do an investigation, and instead said that the villagers should bring the motorcycles into town to the police station. The chief refused, saying that the police would probably just sell the bikes, or nothing would happen. The end result was that the assaulted man never saw justice, the bikes are still being held for ransom in the village, and at least one of the perpetrators is now dead or suffering from a gunshot wound (although not confirmed).

This is an unfortunately common situation in Cameroon, in which no one really wins and justice is never served. In order to truly combat mob justice, one has to combat the blatant ineffectiveness of local and regional authorities.

How to Combat Mob Justice

Because of the variety of social factors that contribute to mob justice, as well as a pervasive mentality that it is the only way to bring people to justice, the challenge of combating it is indeed a challenge. However, there are a variety of techniques (ranging from simple tasks to elaborate system changes) that help promote alternative ways of dealing with criminals.

1. Spreading Awareness of Human Rights

Many people in Cameroon may have heard the term “Human Rights”, but aren’t entirely sure what it really means. Some people have never heard it at all. By teaching people about rights with which they themselves are endowed and the benefits they would receive from the promotion and protection of these rights, one can empower people to say “I don’t want my rights violated, so I don’t want to violate someone else’s.”

As explained above, Mob Justice violates one’s right to a fair trial, and right to be held innocent until proven guilty. Anyone who has experienced Cameroon’s judicial system could relate stories about their rights being violated in that institution; as a result of their experiences, they know how much better the justice system would be if it consciously upheld these particular rights. An effective way to breach the subject is: If this were your son or daughter, wouldn’t you want them to have a fair trial before being sentenced to death? Making the situation personal creates a sensitivity to the plight of mob justice victims.



GCI staff delivering a Mob Justice workshop to members of the Mofako Bekondo Traditional Council, vigilante group, and Women’s Executive Council, April 2011

2. Improve Local Justice System and Demand Accountability

The climate that leads to Mob Justice begins with an ineffective local justice system. In places where the police cannot be counted on to deal with criminals, it is only logical that victims and the communities in which crimes take place will feel compelled to take the law into their own hands.

A way for the government of Cameroon to combat Mob Justice in the country would be to improve local justice systems and demand accountability for the way they handle criminals, especially in rural areas. A police chief in charge of a region that includes rural villages is responsible for ensuring access to justice in those rural villages and, if necessary, a police force. It is not acceptable that villages and villagers who suffer violent crimes have to wait days or more for a police investigator to show up to the crime scene.

While systematic changes in the judicial system and police force must come from the Cameroonian government, it is also an important and empowering step that rural communities can take to begin demanding accountability and effectiveness from the stations that have jurisdiction over them.

3. Teach Non-Violence

Mob justice is only possible in a culture where violence is an acceptable form of punishment. In Cameroon there are cases of brutality and unnecessary violence in all forms of life, especially in the justice system. One way of combating mob justice from the ground up is to teach children that violence is not an effective way to solve problems. By teaching mediation skills, encouraging children to observe the Traditional Council mediating local disputes, refraining from beating children and animals, and working to be non-violent in day to day life, it is possible to eliminate Mob Justice altogether. A community that doesn't accept violence on a day to day basis will not accept violent retribution for an un-convicted person.

4. Don't Participate

This is the most vital and powerful tool any community has in combating mob justice. Even if a person does not deal a blow or participate directly in the harming of an alleged criminal, it is vital to those people who *are* delivering violent retribution that there is a crowd of people supporting them. By not participating in this mob mentality, refusing to tacitly support that torture of an un-convicted person, and encouraging other people to uphold human rights, any person can do their part to stop mob justice.

What GCI is Doing

GCI works in a variety of ways to combat Mob Justice, mostly by educating rural communities about its dangers and negative implications, by promoting awareness about human rights and human rights violations, and by improving traditional councils to promote a climate judicial effectiveness and reliability.

Mob Justice Education: GCI holds workshops with both traditional councils and vigilante groups to educate about mob justice, how it violates human rights, the reasons it happens, and how it can be avoided. Then, we work together with community and vigilante group leaders to work out strategies for combating Mob Justice in the villages that we work.



The Mofako Bekondo vigilante group, September 2011

Human Rights Education: The UN Declaration of Human Rights is the basis of our mission, and human rights education is a cornerstone of our work. We believe that a community that is educated about human rights is more likely to live in a way that doesn't violate them. GCI works to educate people from all parts of the community about human rights (Traditional Councils, Women's Councils, church groups, social groups, etc), as well as working specifically with Vigilante Groups to raise awareness about what it means to violate someone's rights and to train them in security techniques that protect those rights instead.

Improving Traditional Councils: GCI works with traditional councils to teach effective mediation skill, and promote transparency. It is our hope that when people can turn to their councils to help them solve conflicts, there will be less of a reason to turn to Mob Justice. An empowered community is a powerful community, and we hope to empower all our partner villages to solve conflicts in effective, efficient, non-violent ways.

Conclusion

Mob justice is the symptom of a society where ignorance, an incompetent justice system, and human rights violations impede access to justice. The root cause of the phenomenon is the lack of public trust in the legal and security authorities to properly handle suspected criminals. Compounded with the public's ignorance of the human rights afforded to every citizen, this distrust yields a willingness to try suspected criminals in the court of armed public opinion instead of in a court of law. What results is a vicious cycle of violence where the accused suffer injuries or even death on account of possibly unfounded accusations, which in turn generates more distrust for the law and its enforcement on behalf of the victim and his or her relations.

Eliminating mob justice requires a concerted effort on behalf of the government, civil society organizations, and individual citizens. The value of its eradication lies in more informed citizens, the subsequent creation of a justice system that properly handles crime, and a more peaceful society.

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