

The Local Ombud's role in the handling of complaints about the Zonal Police: redundant or complementary?

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With what type of complaint about Local Police do citizens usually contact their Local Ombudsman? And how is this complementary to the existing internal procedures of the police for dealing with complaints? Or is an ombudsman simply redundant in this process and do the police's internal complaints officers already have the required expertise and networks for this? Can a citizen still see the forest for the trees and vice versa? And what about the relationship between the Zonal Police and the Local Ombudsman? Does a legal framework exist for this? The author attempts to answer these questions, based on her 18 years' experience as an ombudsman in the city of Ghent. Now and again she also refers to the experiences of her local colleagues in Antwerp, Bruges, Mechelen, Ixelles, Charleroi and Courcelles (POLO², 27 March 2015).

1. Introduction

Keep it simple. A local ombudsman will definitely agree with this. For several years, ombudsmen have been arguing in favour of simplicity and transparency, also when it comes to how complaints are handled (Passemiers, 2004: 268). In Belgium citizens can contact the Internal Monitoring Service, the standing police monitoring committee (*Comité P*) and the General Inspectorate of the Federal and Zonal Police with their complaints about their zonal police force. And in recent years, a number of cities have established an internal police hotline so citizens can file their reports or complaints. Because there are so many options available, citizens are at risk of having no idea where to turn or being referred from one complaints officer to another if they are not sufficiently informed beforehand. Moreover, citizens in Antwerp, Bruges, Mechelen or Charleroi can also file a complaint about the Zonal Police with their municipal or local Ombudsman. In Ixelles and Courcelles this is impossible. The police zone in the latter two municipalities covers several municipalities whereas the Ombudsman is not authorised to deal with complaints for all of these municipalities (Personal communication, 2015).

Often the Police have asked why a Local Ombudsman is involved at all? What added value can he/she offer in what is effectively a very densely populated landscape for handling complaints? Do they actually have added value for citizens? And what about for the police (Hubeau, 1997)?

In all fairness, it is easy to see how having to report to various complaints offers can have a demotivating effect from the policeman's point of view. We need to regularly ask ourselves whether an ombudsman has a role to play in relation to the police and if yes, which role. This keeps us on our toes. But the reply to this question must take into account all the stakeholders in this story. It must especially focus on the citizens' needs, as citizens have the right to criticise the government in a democracy, without having to worry about the impact of this.

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² POLO: *Permanent Overleg Lokale Ombudslui* (Permanent consultation of local ombudspeople)

2. Why does a citizen contact a local ombudsman?

Something that immediately became apparent when the function of Ombudsman was created in Antwerp (1991) and in Ghent (1997) was that citizens felt compelled to contact this municipal Ombudsman Service with their complaints about the Local Police Force. From 1997 until 2006, police operations were in the top 3 of topics that were most susceptible to complaints being filed with the Ghent Ombudsman. The citizens of Ghent would pop into the office because they spontaneously assumed that a municipal Ombudsman was responsible for dealing with complaints about the police's functioning. After all, the Local Police were also a municipal service? Or maybe they considered contacting the Police about their complaint a case of "confessing to the devil"? Or possibly citizens felt that the Police would not lift the lid on certain affairs. And otherwise they just blindly assumed that police officers would cover for each other now and then. Citizens' distrust of the Police was quite noticeable. If the complainant did indeed contact the police with their complaint, they sometimes felt as if they were actually the suspect due to the way in which they were interrogated. The policemen have substantial expertise in terms of interrogation techniques. The ombudsman, by contrast, is specialised in "listening techniques". In some cases, the policemen who were dealing with a complaint, were of the opinion that the dissatisfaction was not such that they immediately needed to launch a disciplinary hearing or had to record this dissatisfaction. As a result, sometimes citizens ended up having nobody to turn to with their potentially valid complaint. It is worth noting that the percentage of citizens who contacted the ombudsman with such complaints remained relatively high even after the unification of the Belgian Police (compared with other types of complaints) (Passemiers, 2002 to 2007).

Based on the complaints submitted to the Local Ombudsman between 1997 and 2002 it became clear that the people of Ghent perceived the Local Police as being a police service that was part of the city's operations. Citizens felt very involved in its operation, which, in a sense, was good news. It is not surprising that policemen tend to frequently be the subject of a complaint. Ghent has a large Police Force, which is continually in touch with citizens, day in, day out. The contacts are not always that pleasant (Passemiers, 1997: 28).

Moreover, the Police are the only party in a democracy which can legally use reasonable violence. The relationship between citizens and the police is similar to that of David and Goliath. In fact, the relationship between citizens and the Police is a very dualistic one. Sometimes the police are considered as a friend, at other times as an enemy. This was also the conclusion of the review of most of the complaints about the police: the complaints often proved less founded than for other services. However, it is not easy to look at a policeman's actions objectively. We frequently noticed that a lot of these complaints were due to perception and caused by misunderstandings. It also soon became clear that citizens required a central hotline and information centre about all the municipal services, including the police for specific signals (reports, requests for information). Precisely to avoid that reports would not followed up, giving rise to complaints (Passemiers, 2009).

The number of complaints that were filed in the early years showed that citizens that filed a complaint with a municipal ombudsman wanted to talk to an external independent complaints officer. They expected this person to serve as an arbitrator or a signaller. Possibly Zeus could have been somewhat right?³

³ When the Greek God Zeus gave people the choice about how they wanted to solve conflicts, they chose a gentle and peaceful, arbitrating and reconciling solution, based on consultation over a violent approach to conflict-solving, which was imposed by the gods.

But the Police also needed an ombudsman who did not magnify problems but instead could identify problems within the organisation after a careful investigation based on the right of reply. From the start of the collaboration in Ghent, it was clearly stipulated that a municipal ombudsman has no disciplinary authority. He or she shall pass on such complaints to the Internal Monitoring Service and will not make any statements about judicial files. The complementary nature of the local ombudsman mainly consists of checking complaints about the police's functioning against the criteria of good administration used by ombudsmen all over the world. These criteria encompass more than just the regulations and official duties and the associated analyses. The recommendations of an external ombudsman, which are based on repeated complaints, can contribute to adjustments and a more qualitative service by the Police (Passemiers, 2009). Because the opposite also often happened: if a complaint proved "too light" for a disciplinary investigation, the local ombudsman sometimes gleaned relevant information from the complaint, based on the ombuds criteria with the aim of avoiding such complaints in the future. The repeated complaints, especially, which are often due to possible shortcomings in the organisation's operation (and which are not always related to a policeman's personal behaviour) can be dealt with by the Ombudsman on a secondary level or when the Police do not tackle them. But it goes without saying that a professional appeal body can only do its job efficiently if the Police itself have an accessible internal complaints level, which serves as the first line of call (Thijs & Bouckaert, 2007).

3. Actual complaints, the case of Ghent

3.1. The Local Police: not an island in the city

Nowadays there are specialists everywhere but sometimes it is the generalists who we need the most. A local ombudsperson is one of the few people with a helicopter view of the municipal services and all the co-stakeholders. The efficient operation of the Police, which positions itself as a community Police Force, is jointly determined by the collaboration with other municipal services and vice versa. Let us use Ghent as an example to illustrate this. The service of the Ombudsman was established in 1997, a few years after Antwerp. From its inception, the service of the Ombudsman in Ghent received repeated complaints about the fact that it took the Police an inordinate amount of time to confirm a new address. While the inquiry is a job for the Police, the actual registration of the new address is done by the register office. In Belgium a citizen only exists if he has a registered address, according to Napoleonic law. This means that if it takes the Police an unreasonably long time to confirm this address, and therefore allow the citizen to register with the register office this has far-reaching social consequences for a citizen. Of course, this can also be due to the citizen him or herself. However, Ghent's Police Force seemed to be lagging behind when it came to these inquiries, in the period from 1997 until 2000, due to various organisational causes. The ombudsman joined forces with Ghent's Police and the register office to see what caused the backlog. Specific recommendations and adjustments were made in the register office and in the Police Force. The Ghent ombudsman also monitored these adjustments. After 2000, these complaints disappeared for the most part.

Which specific role did the municipal Ombudsman play in this framework? This type of complaint was not picked up spontaneously by the register office or the police from 1997 until 2002. In most cases, the complainant was referred from here to there and back, or more specifically from the register office to the police and back. Nor did they map the scope of the problem. As a result, no adjustments were made. Following an analysis of these repeated complaints by the ombuds service, the services met up and succeeded in reducing this type of complaints to almost zero. The Police caught up on the backlog and Ghent's Local Police Force no longer has systematic arrears. Ghent is not the only city with this type of complaint. This was also a frequently heard complaint in Antwerp and Mechelen.

Nowadays a new type of complaint related to the confirmation of a new address has revealed that there is a need for adapted, energy-saving, digital support which also facilitates control (who actually causes the delay, the police or the register office?). In Ghent, the digital support is too slow. The ombudsman has taken the lead and continues to take the lead for this, looking to her colleague in Antwerp for good practices. The local ombudsman can rely on a national and international network of ombudsmen after all.

The specific role of the local ombudsman in this type of complaint (which involves several municipal services and which local ombudsmen are asked to deal with) is associated with the job's nature: the ombudsman is the external and independent bridge between several services. He or she does much more than merely map complaints and deal with them. The ombudsman will try to understand the causes, by talking to all the services involved, analysing the information they receive from various services, they can make recommendations (and even enforce these) and monitor developments throughout the years. They can also point out that the problems arise precisely because of the lack of efficient digital support for the police and the register office. Sometimes the Zonal Police and the local Ombudsman are also allies.

3.2. Shortcomings in one's own organisation

3.2.1. Shortcomings in internal and external communication and continuity of service

The valid complaints of citizens about the lack of clear external and internal mutual communication, which often give rise to misunderstandings, are especially striking. Repeatedly complaints relate to the fact that phone messages by citizens to the district police officer have not been passed on or have been lost. Complaints were also submitted about repeated or long-term absences, which compromised the continuity of service (Passemiers, 1997 until 2014). An objective review of these complaints requires a mapping of absences of personnel by police management in order to make adjustments (if necessary).

From 1997 until 2009 people in Ghent also complained about the lack of a clear, central, digital information centre and hotline and the lack of a customer-friendly information desk. The citizens felt that they did not have any privacy (the people of Ghent compared it to an aquarium) and felt that it was anything but customer-friendly (Passemiers, 2000). Often the moment of contact at this counter proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back, prompting citizens to contact the ombudsman with their complaint (Passemiers, 1997: 28). Discussions at such counters escalated and because there was no CC TV it was impossible to see who had instigated what. The ombudsman made recommendations, which led to a number of adjustments and a reduction of the number of complaints.

The complementarity of the joint approach is apparent: the local ombudsperson registers when which complaints are less frequent or on the rise again and why. Citizens and the administration can monitor these developments based on a public annual report by an external complaints officer. All the public annual reports of the Belgian local ombudsmen are available online.

3.2.2. Procedures that are too cumbersome, carelessness and a lack of control

In recent years, especially, local ombudsmen increasingly received comments about carelessly worded police reports (Passemiers, 2013). Should an inspector answer to the internal monitoring service or to the internal complaints officer? Such inaccuracies are repeatedly noticed. However, in many cases, these complaints are well-founded. People have always expressed their irritation when it becomes clear that a policeman does not know the regulations or applies them wrongly (Passemiers, 1998). It is important that the police regularly check whether officers are sufficiently knowledgeable. An ombudsman can make recommendations in their city but it is up to the police to make the necessary adjustments. They know their organisation inside and out after all. This too is an example of complementary thinking.

Complaints that have since become less numerous may have been the outcome of procedures that were too cumbersome, not clear enough or simply lacking. It became apparent that the people of Ghent had to wait far too long for an authorisation to install scaffolding in public space. Various services had to be contacted. As a result, they often only received the authorisation after the works had been completed, posing risks for citizens (Passemiers, 1998 and 2011).

Another striking example related to the complaints about the lack of a proper inventory of goods that had been seized and about the unreasonable waiting times for returning a vehicle that had been seized. After a wallet that had been brought to a police station had disappeared, adjustments were made. Two years later, however (in the framework of a TV programme), it became clear that a more waterproof procedure was needed to avoid such complaints, which can also undermine the image of the police force. Control also continues to be a problem. In recent years, in disputes with citizens on the streets of Ghent, we have realised that we are insufficiently able or in some cases even unable to check which policeman was where and what instant. Damage to police vehicles (which require repairs, to be borne by the taxpayer) are increasingly difficult to link to the people involved. This does not facilitate control. Here again, this is a clear case of a David and Goliath relationship. Citizens must be able to rely on the fact that the standing police monitoring committee and internal complaints officers continue to have sufficient resources to be able to link the complaints (about possible transgressive behaviour) to the right policeman. It is up to the ombudsman to give a signal here.

Citizens remain critical about their Local Police force however and the local ombudsman thus has to deal with many complaints about the exemplary role of police officers. The ombudsman in Ghent has received complaints about police officers not wearing their seatbelts, parking on pavements to pick up a sandwich, untidy uniforms and so on. Citizens will rarely go to their local police station with this type of complaint. And if they do, they run the risk that their complaint will not be recognised as a complaint. Such complaints can however undermine the police force's authority and credibility.

3.2.3. Complaints about the lack of a sufficient response or no response at all

When the citizen's complaint relates to a lack of action by the police then chances are that the internal complaints officers of the police force will not act upon it either. Unless there are far-reaching and visible consequences, which are usually published in the press. Most complaints about a lack of response to local ombudsperson usually have no specific consequences. Yet we deal with them because they may possibly contain interesting information for police management.

Citizens drop in when they are disappointed about the fact that the police fail to meet their expectations. Expectations, however, should be reasonable. Comments such as "the public prosecutor's office never prosecutes anyway", "this offender will never be arrested", "if we don't do anything, then we end up having to justify ourselves" or the comment made when a citizen reported a stolen bike "we have other priorities" or "why don't you steal one yourself?" (a comment which we have heard independently and from several citizens in 1999 and 2000) or "the mayor will not allow us to intervene" or in case of serious noise nuisance at night or parking problems in the city: "you should have gone to live in the country instead" are like a red rag to a bull (Passemiers, 1999). They can however also indicate that a growing number of house burglaries and bike thefts can be measured more objectively by linking them to the figures of the police. In Ghent, the phenomenon of burglaries and bike thefts received more attention and the police communicated more about it. Police officers and citizens risk becoming demotivated if the people that they rely on and who have been trained to deal with this tell them that there is nothing they can do about it or that their intervention will not change a thing (Passemiers, 2012: 63).

And yes. Often it is the citizen's word against that of the police officer. But at the same time, if we do repeatedly hear such comments from different citizens, we take the liberty to report this and continue to do so until this situation has been adjusted.

Most citizens do not feel the need to complain. They repeatedly ask a district police inspector to take proactive action when he or she notices violations to police regulations as this will only benefit the community spirit. Hedges that form an obstacle on pavements forcing the disabled or mothers with pushchairs to walk on the street for example... Citizens appreciate it when their district police inspector takes proactive action. We have noticed that the number of complaints about this have reduced.

3.2.4. Signalling potentially transgressive behaviour by the Police or irresponsible behaviour by citizens

Complaints to the municipal ombudsman about discrimination or ethnic profiling⁴ are rare and often also difficult to examine objectively. Citizens are aware of this, which is why they often refrain from filing a formal complaint. Oddly enough, however, we have registered complaints in Ghent by citizens who think that the police do not intervene when young people cause noise nuisance in certain squares, precisely because they are immigrant youth. They think that the police officers are afraid of intervening in these neighbourhoods. These complaints were or are submitted by Ghent residents of foreign extraction. They were of the opinion that not responding to such complaints misrepresented a large group of immigrants that did not cause any nuisance because of the lack of a "clear tough approach". In short, here too the ombudsteam was asked to look into a complaint of insufficient or non-response.

The ombudsman role mainly consists of pointing out these problem situations and societal problems on time and mapping them so it is possible to review them more objectively. As a result, they are addressed and it is possible to react swiftly.

The ombudsman also intervened as an arbitrator between a number of citizens who were arrested during a roundup in Zuid district, who ultimately were not in any way implicated in the matter. However, they had been rounded up and handcuffed after which they were taken to the police station in police cars while a crowd looked on. They felt that they had been arrested based on their appearance (Passemiers, 2009). Signals about unreasonable, excessive violence by police officers vis-à-vis citizens are always sent to the internal monitoring service for further investigation.

We have also noticed that some citizens behave inappropriately to police officers, as is apparent from complaints. In recent years, we have concluded that citizens tend to play off services against one another. Citizens have taken to parking their cars wrongly, causing an obstacle, in order to avoid parking fines. This is a violation of traffic rules. A traffic warden may not write out a fine when a citizen is violating these rules. This is the job of a police officer. Unfortunately, they sometimes have other priorities. It is the local government's task to stop this inappropriate behaviour by citizens? Soon Ghent will also start to write out municipal administrative fines for such violations. However, the question still remains: who will write out these fines? Citizens who contact the ombudsperson after a conflict with a police officer, which involved inappropriate behaviour, often ask about reconciliation. The ombudsperson only agrees to this if they will at least proffer an apology.

⁴ Is the use of racial, ethnic, national or religious characteristics as a selection method for identity and security checks and insinuation instead of reasonable suspicion?

2.5. Evolution of complaints about Police to local ombudsmen

One of the core tasks of the local ombudsmen since 1997 is to register complaints about how services function, to analyse, assess and share recommendations. This means we can also check the evolution of the number of complaints about the Police. This too can be interesting information for an organisation. The complaints about Ghent's Police have dropped since 2007, largely due to adjustments that were made based on information from previous complaints, limiting the number of core tasks and transferring tasks that proved an issue with citizens to other services including parking fines (now parking fees), occupation of public space and traffic-technical aspects such as the occupation of public roads, signage, which have since been transferred to Ghent's Mobility Authority. Nuisance and environmental nuisance are now the responsibility of the Nuisance unit (community guards and enforcement services) and the Environment Service rather than that of the Police.

TV series such as "Flikken" about the Ghent Police Force have also opened the doors to the internal monitoring service and we have noticed that some citizens contact the internal monitoring service and the standing committee more readily.

Improved communication, thanks to the hotline and the website, have also helped reduce the number of reports, requests for information and direct complaints. However, even today, the Police do not distil much information from all these data. The hotline is mainly a way of passing on information. Citizens are realising this and they are increasingly forwarding their reports and dissatisfaction to a more decisive instance, namely the Mayor, who is the head of the Zonal Police in Ghent. They hope that their complaint will be given priority by doing this.

3.3. Evolution of the relationship between Local Ombudsman and the Zonal Police

3.3.1. Partners or opposites?

In 2002, Tuur van Wallendael, the first ombudsman of Antwerp, wrote the following about the relationship between the ombudsman and the local police force: "From the start, I found that the relationship between ombudsman and police was problematic. This was largely due to two factors: one more formal, the other more emotional" (Van Wallendael, personal communication, 4 June 2003).

In referring to the formal factor, Van Wallendael meant that the Local Police serve two masters, namely the public prosecutor and the mayor. The emotional factor did not refer to the police in general but to some police officers who did not tolerate any interference.

Since then, the situation has evolved. However, some local ombudsmen still consider the relationship between the Police and the Ombudsman as rather awkward or even inexistent, as is the case in Mechelen and Sint-Niklaas. Antwerp, Bruges and Ghent see the collaboration as constructive. Not all citizens in Belgium can contact an ombudsman with their complaints about a municipal service. The Federal Ombudsman has no competence for this and municipalities are not obliged to appoint an Ombudsman. You could therefore say that in Belgium all Belgians are equal, but some are more equal than others, in reference to Orwell... The Federal ombudsman has no competence for complaints about the municipal services. But, in contrast with the Dutch Ombudsman, nor is he responsible for overseeing the Federal Police. In brief, not all citizens in Belgium have the same access to an external local ombudsman to whom they can (also) submit a complaint about the Zonal Police Force. And even if there is an ombudsman in place, a lot depends on the constructive collaboration between the local ombudsman and the Police Force. It is a good thing that police complaints are dealt with by an internal monitoring service but there is an important final element lacking in the process. Even in municipalities where an ombudsman has been appointed, a lot depends on the partnership between the local

ombudsman and the top of the Local Police . And it is not always that straightforward. Partly this is also due to discussions about whether the Local Ombudsman should have responsibility for this. As long as both parties are not convinced about the use of such a collaboration, rules and procedures, and the secrecy of the inquiry will sometimes be invoked as a specious reason. That is why it is important to understand the differences and the complementarity between both institutions.

3.4. The differences and similarities

The term “Police” refers to individuals who are in charge of law enforcement, supervision and adherence to laws and taking action in case of violations. In recent years, the Local Police have positioned themselves as a community police force. But many citizens still think of the police first and foremost as “the long arm of the law”.

The relationship between the citizen and the Police is often of a very different nature than that between the citizen and the ombudsman. The latter is an external complaints officer. As a result, citizens do not feel as if they are confessing to the devil. Police officers often have to play a very difficult role with citizens, in some cases even penalising them, which in turn elicits dissatisfaction and complaints. All the more compared with services, which only have to convey pleasant messages to citizens. The fear that citizens could also abuse their right to submit a complaint is not entirely unjustified. However, this should never be a reason not to take the complaints of citizens seriously.

It is not entirely unrealistic that the fact that policemen can be confronted with criminal citizens in a number of cases has contributed to a certain measure of distrust vis-à-vis citizens in general. This may sometimes be an obstacle to the objective handling of a complaint.

Why is it so difficult at times to convince certain police officers of the merit of working with the ombudsperson? Lack of persuasion or arguments by the ombudsperson? Or is this due to the fact that you cannot enforce anything as an ombudsman? This may also be due to the culture and relationships that are typical of both these jobs. It is almost impossible to change a culture in the short term. Even though we have seen a change on the local police level, since they started to position themselves as the “community police” in recent years. In large cities, such as in Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges, the collaboration between the police and the local ombudsperson is constructive. In Antwerp the police also share their first-line complaints with the ombudsman these can also be included in the ombudsman’s annual report.

In all cases, this is always a case of living apart together.

Defensive reflexes are inherent of the police culture and these reflexes mean that the police have a tendency to close rank and isolate themselves from the outside world when they feel threatened. There is also a strong form of loyalty within a police force (or is it a case of pressure) among employees. As a result, internal abuses or shortcomings rarely see the day and whistle-blowers rarely come forward.

Whereas the ombudsperson has actually been appointed to guarantee and promote transparent governance, there is a lack of transparency on the police level and the control procedures are often very nebulous. The police have justly commented that discretion is imperative when dealing with certain police-related complaints. And this can cause tension between these two stakeholders.

There is another vital difference between the ombudsman and the internal complaints officers of the police. An ombudsperson can bark, but not bite. The ombudsman has no disciplinary authority and their recommendations are not binding. They can however have moral authority

and exercise an impact through their annual report. Especially when the recommendations are improved or implemented (Passemiers, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2008).

Only 1.5 percent of the cases processed in 2008 by the Ghent Service of the Ombudsman are related to the behaviour of an official, meaning of the individual.

Until a few years ago, police officers tended to almost always associate internal complaints officers with disciplinary inquiries. This meant that a number of complaints (which did not always relate to disciplinary action but to possible failures in the organisation or infrastructure) were sometimes not considered or deemed not serious.

Finally, there is also the significant difference in the relationship of power between the Police and citizens and the Police and the Ombudsman. In many cases, citizens' relationship with the government is similar to that of David and Goliath. Individual citizens contact the ombudsman precisely when they consider that the government is treating them unfairly. Unfair treatment not only relates to a shortcoming in the service that is provided but also to unlawful (i.e. not in accordance with regulation) and unfair (i.e. random) treatment. In fact, they are asking the ombudsman to independently investigate this and publish this so the organisation can be adapted. The word ombudsman, after all, means he or she who speaks on behalf of someone else.

Let us not forget that only the government, and more specifically the police, can use legal violence, checks whether the rules that have been set out by the government are adhered to and can penalise citizens. A policeman's word will always outweigh a citizen's word. It is therefore imperative that a police officer shows integrity and displays credibility when he is assigned such a position of power. It is vital for citizens and for society, including the police, that they get wind of signals as soon as possible if this integrity is compromised. The ombudsman, meanwhile, relies on authority. He can only recommend and try to convince the government to implement corrections.

4. Conclusion: 'Le plaisir des disputes, c'est de faire la paix'⁵

However different both jobs may be, this is precisely the reason why they are so complementary. They always must use the needs of the citizens who complain, of the taxpayers as a starting point. They pay for an adequate service by the ombudsperson and the police. To date, citizens with complaints about the Local Police submit their complaints to internal complaints officers and the Local Ombudsman. The Local Ombudsman and the Local Police Force are close to citizens, each in their own way.

The internal complaints officer guarantees expertise. He or she specialises in complaints about the police. Testing police officers' performance and actions against regulations is clearly the expertise of the internal complaints officer of the police force. The ombudsperson's role is usually limited to indicating problems.

The local ombudsman is an expert when it comes to dealing with complaints, checking complaints against a much wider array of criteria (or ombudsperson standards) in the framework of sound governance and efficient service. The ombudsman is a generalist. He or she has a helicopter view of the police zone as well as of the services of the city and the public social welfare centre and all the co-stakeholders in the city's administration.

It is obvious that the Local Ombudsman can mainly play a role in case of repeated complaints that are related to the functioning of the police and to shortcomings in the organisation of the

⁵ Alfred de Musset 1810-1857. The pleasure of disputes is in making peace.

Local Police Force. These complaints are often also linked to the functioning of other municipal services. The analyses of the local ombudsman, can give rise to recommendations and possibly changes to avoid complaints in the future.

Citizens who feel that the Internal Monitoring Services of the Police do not take their complaint seriously can always contact the Ombudsman, who can publish the complaint in his annual report .

The collaboration is only solid because of the difference in terms of what they do: citizens see the ombudsman as an external complaints officer, an arbitrator, a person of trust, someone to whom they can turn with a complaint without ending up in an administrative quagmire of complaints procedures or leading to a disciplinary inquiry for the policeman in question. Sometimes this leads to useful information – if the Ombudsman and the Local Police have the option of conducting a discreet investigation - , which the heads of Police would have never been aware of. This information can also give rise to recommendations that can contribute to the quality of service in the police zone. Which in turn contributes to a society that is more fair and more pleasant to live in.

It is important that the Local Police and the Local Ombudsman agree to focus on sound administration and qualitative service.

On a final note: citizens are not “customers” in the commercial sense. They are citizens with rights and duties and their own responsibility. And with expectations vis-à-vis the Police and Ombudsman, which are sometimes justified, and sometimes are not. Because the relationship between the government and citizens is also a two-way process . A rule is a rule, also for a local ombudsman but... that is not sufficient.

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