

A BACKGROUND GUIDE TO MUKURU



In Mukuru slum, Nairobi, inequality is stark. Children whose parents can't afford to pay school fees spend their days sorting through piles of rubbish. Oxfam have been working in Mukuru to provide waterless toilets in local schools. When we visited a school to hear about the impact of the toilets on the children's lives we spoke to young people about what they would like to be when they grow up and their hopes and dreams for the future.

Teachers are the real superheroes



Rachel, age 9, wants to be a teacher when she grows up and believes the government should build more schools in Mukuru.

Credit: Sam Tarling/Oxfam

We asked children what they thought about life in Mukuru slum. Importantly, most of the children saw Mukuru as an entirely different place to Nairobi, the city they are supposed to be a part of. Their interviews speak volumes about inequality in Kenya and the gulf of opportunity between rich and

poor. But they were also full of ideas and solutions when asked "What would you change if you could be president for one day?".

Rachel, nine years old, firmly believes that teachers are the real superheroes in Mukuru. It's teachers who have the real super-powers to transform lives around here.

When we asked Rachel to tell us what life is like in Mukuru for children, she looked wide eyed, as though imparting a huge, terrible secret:

"There are some children in Mukuru who cannot go to school" she says in a half whisper, "Instead they go to the dumpsite and collect dirty rubbish because they need to earn money. Their parents leave them at home and think that they have gone to school, but really they go to the dumpsite."

Going to the dumpsite instead of school



Morgan, 5 years old, plays while his mother works at the Jamaica dump in the middle of the Mukuru informal settlement. Credit: Sam Tarling/Oxfam

A couple of days later we visit a dump named '**Jamaica**' to meet one of the children Rachel was talking about. Morgan, five years old, told us his family had no money for his school fees, so he came here each day with his mother to search the rubbish.

This vast dump used to be a quarry, but today it's grown from a hole in the ground into an epic landscape of steaming mountains and valleys of trash from Nairobi, much of it from expensive hotels and restaurants. Between 300-400 people live and work around the dump, mostly searching for plastics or computer waste to sell, but also looking for food to eat. As they work, dozens of vultures tower over them, it is worryingly unclear whether the vultures are drawn to the rubbish, or to the small children working the site.

Looking for a lucky golden ticket



Elizabeth, a single mum age 26, works all day at the dump to provide for her children who are 6 and 3.
Credit: Sam Tarling/Oxfam

Workers pick through the mess of plastics, food, burning rubbish and syringes in flipflops, with no protection from the toxic fumes. Perhaps they hope one day to turn over a piece of stinking food waste from a 5 star hotel and find a lucky golden ticket out of Mukuru.

We spot hospital waste, packets of unused pills and an IT student's manual for how to run web publishing programmes. One of our guides carefully blows the warm ash from its cover and smooths out the pages with his fingers. "I'll keep it in case I would like to study computers one day," he tells us.

It's amazing to think of who the computer student might be who threw this manual away, and if he could imagine where it would end up. I wonder if he's aware that there are people living perhaps just a few streets away from him, who would be grateful just to have enjoyed a full school education, paid for by the government?

When we asked Rachel what she would do to help these children if she were President, she answers straight away.

"If I was President, I'd like to help the poor and ensure that they can all go to school. I would build more schools in Mukuru."

It's so simple. More schools, more investment in education. One small step to solving inequality and poverty. Let's hope that by the time Rachel is teaching, her dream will have become reality.

Adapted from a [blog post](#) by Mora McLagan.