

Urban Poverty and Vulnerability in Kenya

The urgent need for co-ordinated action to reduce urban poverty



A woman in Nairobi's Mukuru slum fetches water for her children. Credit: Oxfam GB

The face of poverty in Kenya is changing and the country is facing a new urban crisis. Nairobi is facing rapid urbanisation, yet the divide between rich and poor is growing wider and 60 per cent of residents now live in slums with no or limited access to even the most basic services. Urban poverty is set to be Kenya's defining crisis over the next decade if it is not urgently addressed.

The growth of Kenya's urban poverty

The scale of urban poverty in Kenya is something that policymakers can no longer afford to ignore. Between a third and half of the country's urban population live in poverty. The country is urbanising at such a speed that it is projected to be 50 per cent urban by 2020, and half of all Kenya's poor will be living in urban areas. In this respect there can be no doubt that poverty itself is rapidly urbanising in Kenya. Moreover, the percentage of the urban population in the poorest categories of all (the 'food poor'¹ and 'hardcore poor'²) is on the increase, and the gap between rich and poor is rapidly widening. While some urban dwellers have seen their position improve due to impressive levels of economic growth in recent years, poverty has been deepening for the majority of the urban poor who have become trapped in downward spirals of deprivation and vulnerability.

The increasingly severe inequalities in cities have negative implications for human security, stability and economic development. Urban poverty and inequality can have catastrophic social consequences when combined with poor governance and ethnic resentment, as the violence in urban informal settlements following the 2007 presidential election made all too clear. Meanwhile gender inequalities are deeply entrenched in the slums, with women being most disadvantaged of all, and slum children are the unhealthiest in the country according to a wide range of indicators.

Oxfam GB in Kenya's new urban analysis reveals the extent of the challenge facing Kenya's cities and calls for urgent action to address a situation that has already reached crisis proportions. Focusing on Nairobi in particular – a city whose population is set to spiral from around 3.4 million today to almost 6 million in 2025 – key points raised in the Oxfam Kenya analysis include the following:

Poverty and inequality in Kenya's burgeoning slums

- Almost half (43 per cent) of the total 'food poor' in Kenya live in urban slums, amounting to over 4 million people

¹ Inability to meet all nutritional needs due to expenditure on other basic non-food essentials

² Refers to households that would not meet their minimum food requirements even if they allocated *all* their income on food.

60 per cent of Nairobi's population – around 2 million people – live in slums with limited or non-existent access to water, sanitation, housing, education and healthcare services

- The poorest urban-dwellers spend up to $\frac{3}{4}$ of their income on staple foods alone. This has been exacerbated by the recent food crisis that has seen maize prices rise by 133 per cent
- While primary school enrolment is marginally higher in urban areas, after the age of 15 far fewer boys and girls attend school in cities than rural areas. This has significant impacts as urban poverty has been shown to be inversely related to the level of education of the head of the household
- Inequality is declining in Kenya's rural areas, but in cities it is high and rising. While the rural Gini coefficient³ is now around 0.38 – indicating similar levels of inequality to Portugal and much lower levels than the US – in Nairobi it is a staggering 0.59, indicating levels of inequality similar to Johannesburg in the mid-1990s at the end of apartheid
- In a Nairobi slum area home to around 25,000 people there may be as few as two private schools and no public ones
- Women in the slums are almost 5 times as likely as men to be unemployed

Urban vulnerability in Nairobi: The harsh reality beyond simple poverty measures

Even if, in terms of income, there are still today a higher number of poor people in the countryside than in Kenya's cities, poor urban-dwellers face an alarming (and growing) range of vulnerabilities. Oxfam GB Kenya's report highlights the mutually reinforcing dimensions of vulnerability in Nairobi's slums, including the following:

- Urban residents are almost *twice* as likely to be infected with HIV as their rural counterparts
- Children in Nairobi's slums are among the unhealthiest in the country. Over half are likely to suffer acute respiratory infection and almost half under 5 are stunted; moreover they are less likely to be immunised than children elsewhere in Kenya and more prone to diarrhoea and fever
- Population densities can be higher than 1,000 people per hectare in the slums – compared with as low as 4 per hectare in Nairobi's wealthy areas
- The combination of climate change and unplanned urban growth

Neonatal, infant and under-5 mortality rates in Nairobi's slums are all significantly higher than the national average. In some slums infant and under-5 mortality rates are double those in rural areas

³ A Gini coefficient of 0 would indicate perfect equality (that is, where everyone in the population has the same expenditure or income), whereas a value of 1 would correspond to perfect inequality (that is, when all expenditure or income is accounted for by a single person in the population).

The poor commonly pay eight times as much as the rich for water, as they are forced to buy from private vendors in the slums, where almost 90 per cent of the population have no piped water connection

has led to ever greater numbers of urban houses being severely affected by flooding

- Social support networks are considered to be weaker in cities than in rural areas and the tendency for ethnicity to be mobilised for destructive ends is on the increase
- Nearly two thirds of slum residents interviewed said they did not feel safe inside their settlements
- Almost half of Nairobi's population admitted to actively participating in bribery and almost all thought corruption was endemic in the city. The necessity of paying bribes can have a particularly devastating effect on the poor who can barely afford to meet their basic needs
- A study of the impact of rising food prices in Nairobi's slums found that up to 90 per cent of households had reduced the size or frequency of meals
- Dramatic price increases for basic necessities have led to negative coping strategies, including high-risk livelihoods such as sex work and crime as well as removing children from school for child labour

Poor urban governance: The core problem constraining efforts to reduce poverty

The urban poor are acutely vulnerable to poor governance in all its forms. As well as preventing effective solutions to the problems of poverty and vulnerability highlighted above, poor governance can actively exacerbate them. The governance of Kenya's urban centres remains deeply deficient due to the complex and inadequate institutional, policy and legislative framework at city level and the fact that the urban sector has been and continues to be under-prioritised and under-resourced in the national development agenda.

In Nairobi, for example, the City Council is constrained by central government intervention, lack of funds and pervasive corruption. It is also working to a Master plan over 35 years old. Collaboration between civil society organisations and the City Council is sporadic and poorly co-ordinated, and relations between central and local government are similarly hampered by poor coordination and lack of clarity in the division of functions. Moreover on certain issues, such as disaster prevention and risk reduction, there is a knowledge gap evident at all levels of government. Compounding all this is the fact that government remains highly centralised and there is a persistent reluctance at the centre to acknowledge the full scale of urbanisation and urban poverty in the country.

In all, the urban governance landscape in Kenya is constrained by:

- An inadequate policy, institutional and legislative framework including inadequate protection of poorer people's rights
- The lack of an appropriate land-use policy and housing legislative framework
- Insensitive and poor land management and administration approaches
- Poor coordination of poverty reduction interventions in urban areas
- The lack of surveillance mechanisms and reliable indicators to identify emerging food security situations among the urban poor
- The challenges in proper public resources management

Donors and the Government of Kenya alike need to face up to the reality of this situation if any sustained progress is to be made towards alleviating poverty in urban Kenya. Unchecked poverty and inequality on this scale is likely to have dire consequences in terms of mortality, health and human security. Yet there is ample evidence globally to demonstrate that the practice of good urban governance can contribute towards reducing poverty and vulnerability.

What needs to be done?

Oxfam GB in Kenya is launching a new Urban Programme Strategy in 2009 that aims to build on the organisation's strategic comparative advantages, bringing its experience elsewhere into the urban sector in Kenya. These advantages include coordinating partnerships with key stakeholders, bringing Oxfam GB's experience in peace and conflict transformation in other parts of rural Kenya into the urban arena, capitalising on its international status in terms of resource mobilisation, and utilising its expertise on water, sanitation and food security to support local organisations in delivering basic urban services.

The Strategy will be implemented on a phased basis over a 15-year period, and will focus on three strategic priority areas: urban governance, sustainable livelihoods, and disaster preparedness and risk reduction. These map onto the following overriding objectives, to be achieved by 2024:

- 1) Essential services and social protection programmes to support a minimum standard of living for slum dwellers – public health, food and income security interventions
- 2) An enabling environment that allows for access to sustained and dignified livelihood opportunities by slum dwellers
- 3) Effective, appropriate and co-ordinated disaster preparedness and risk reduction in urban areas

Oxfam GB calls upon the Government of Kenya and its bilateral and multilateral partners to work alongside Oxfam GB in trying to achieve these goals, and makes the following basic recommendations:

- Given the rapid pace of urbanisation in a country that will be 50 per cent urban by 2020, donors need to overcome the tendency towards disproportionate focus on rural areas by increasing aid levels to the urban poor sector, designing programmes specifically aimed at reducing the unique vulnerabilities faced by slum-dwellers
- The Government of Kenya and other actors must promote good urban governance through an enhanced policy environment and capacity development, clarifying the exact roles of different tiers of government in relation to critical questions such as slum upgrading
- The Government of Kenya must acknowledge the magnitude of chronic poverty in urban areas and commit to long-term social protection programmes
- There is a need for co-ordinated, appropriate and urgent emergency response towards periodic shocks like the current food crisis in Nairobi's unplanned settlements
- Donors and the government must work towards the development and use of emergency indicators appropriate for the urban context

Oxfam GB's Urban Projects in Nairobi

In response to the urban crisis, Oxfam GB is working with local Kenyan partners to establish a series of projects in the informal settlements of Nairobi. These include:

Water, Sanitation and new Bio-sanitation centres in Mukuru and Kibera: Oxfam will construct two new water points to provide safe and affordable water for 3,000 people, and link the settlement to the city water systems. Oxfam will also build two environmentally friendly bio-sanitation centres, which will improve access to clean water and sanitation for 1,000 users a day. The centres will harness biogas from human waste and generate liquid fertiliser for use in urban agroforestry projects. Training will also be provided for 200 vulnerable community members to maintain the centres, which will also then provide an income to these families.

Waste management in Kayole: Oxfam is piloting new 'Urine Diversion Dehydrating Toilets' (UDDT) which utilise smaller pits and can be shared by several families, helping to address water scarcity and overcrowding, while reducing the risk of groundwater pollution. A connected waste management scheme will also provide employment opportunities for urban youth.

Cash transfers and improving food security in Kibera, Mukuru and Korogocho: Oxfam, in partnership with CARE International and Concern Worldwide, is using mobile phone technology to provide emergency cash to 10,000 families affected by rising food prices. 'Cash-for-work' programmes and vocational skills training are also planned.



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