



# Community-supported slum-upgrading: Innovations from Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya



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## ABSTRACT

Slum upgrading is accepted as a priority for sustainable development. While there are clear challenges to upgrading, local support and community engagement are seen as essential to success. Typical “top-down” approaches led by institutions with power and resources may fail to generate local engagement. Conversely, initiatives led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) or other self-help groups may garner good community support but may lack institutional and material resources to meet objectives. A hybrid approach that engages the community while mobilizing the resources of governments and large agencies can overcome some of these limitations, but it is not without complications. We examine the process and impact of a slum upgrading pilot project in Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya, that operationalized this hybrid approach by adopting an adaptive management model to promote community engagement. The project was part of the Government of Kenya's Kenya Slum Upgrading Program and involved the Kibera Water and Sanitation Project led by UN-Habitat's Urban Basic Services Branch. The project showed significant early success in building community engagement, but it also encountered significant challenges. We assess the project's success in building community engagement by (a) analyzing documents that reflected the institutional discourse related to the project, (b) examining the record of the implementation of the project, and (c) conducting field surveys and interviews to assess community perception of the project. Survey results show that critical infrastructure in the community has improved over the course of the project and expectations for continued improvement in the future have developed. The study concludes that using an adaptive management approach and strongly promoting community involvement should be the aim of institutions delivering slum-upgrading projects and that this can result in effective, successful development outcomes. While the approach does present significant risks of creating unrealistic expectations, the benefits to project management are clear.

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## 1. Introduction

*The policy adopted towards Kibera in the past has been based on the assumption that it would disappear altogether in a relatively short time. For that reason, neither water supplies, sanitation, education or other facilities have been provided ... [But Kibera] will certainly exist for at least another 25 years and probably longer. ... Experience abundantly shows that serious abuses and very objectionable conditions have resulted from [this] policy pursued, and it must, therefore, be reconsidered.* Letter to the Town Clerk of

Nairobi from Sgt. C.E. Mortimer, the Commissioner for Local Government, Lands, and Settlement (March 26, 1945).

In the 1940s, the hope of colonial officials was evidently that the Kibera community in Nairobi, Kenya would simply vanish. The understanding now is that it will not. Sixty percent of the population in Nairobi is currently living in “severely disadvantaged conditions [and] the number of slum dwellers expected to double within the next 15 years” (UN-Habitat, 2011), and in Kibera, “an estimated population of 200,000 inhabitants live in 256 hectares of land” (UN-Habitat, 2011). The issue of improving the lives of the urban poor continues to be a major challenge (Buckley, Kallergis, & Wainer, 2015; Farha, 2016; Sticzay & Koch, 2015), particularly in rapidly urbanizing developing countries overall, including those in Sub-

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Saharan Africa (Croese, Cirolia, & Graham, 2016; Ochieng, 2013). Despite increased global attention to expanding slums, no widely accepted sustainable and equitable solution has been identified or adopted, and innovation is called for (Andreasen & Møller-Jensen, 2016). Innovation requires records of success (Das & Takahashi, 2009). This paper seeks to contribute to such a record, specifically by researching the experience of a pilot project in Kibera.

One persistent challenge relates to mechanisms for fostering effective community engagement for improving living conditions in slums (Hossain, 2007; Muraya, 2006; Pal, 2006; Rigon, 2014). However, mechanisms for achieving effective public participation are complicated, can be time consuming (Dupont, Banda, Vaidya, & Gowda, 2014; Rigon, 2014; Samad, 2006) and are often neglected (Croese et al., 2016). Instead, with profit, prestige, and simplified management in mind, large centralized projects continue to be developed, despite the fact that they may further marginalize the poor and leave them critically vulnerable (Andreasen & Møller-Jensen, 2016; Buckley et al., 2015; Watson, 2013). The pilot project we study was intended to generate synergies in bottom-up and top-down collaborations.

Historically, efforts to improve slums have addressed housing rather than urban basic services (Muraya, 2006). In Nairobi, projects that focused on housing failed, and left damaging legacies of mistrust and suspicion. These were large, centralized projects led by institutions with power and resources, but they did not succeed in generating community engagement. The Pumwani-Majengo Project, initiated in 1983 (National Housing Corporation, 2004) and the Kibera High Rise Project, initiated in 1990s, both displaced local residents; the Mathare 4A project, started in March 1997, failed because it alienated local people (Kamau & Ngari, 2002; Otiso, 2003).

The legacy of failure shows that, while community support is essential, it is not easily attained in “top-down” approaches (Andreasen & Møller-Jensen, 2016; Croese et al., 2016; Das & Takahashi, 2009; Pal, 2006). However, while “bottom-up” initiatives led by community groups may generate local engagement, they may not have the institutional depth, material or financial resources, or longevity to achieve sustainable positive outcomes. Therefore, a hybrid approach that mobilizes the resources of large agencies (including governments) and yet successfully engages the community may be most effective for slum upgrading.

This paper explores one part of an upgrading initiative in Soweto East, a village within Kibera. The Government of Kenya acknowledged new ethically-based approaches to slum upgrading enunciated at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in 1996. These challenged governments “to break the vicious cycle of poverty, homelessness and unemployment” (Syrjänen, 2008). Determined to avoid the mistakes of the past, the government worked with UN-Habitat—whose discourse addressed “Slums of Hope” (Habitat, 2003)—and developed their own progressive guidelines for the Kenya Slum Upgrading Program (KENSUP) (Government of Kenya, 2004).

The Soweto East initiative was a large-scale, ambitious and controversial project that included land clearance, extensive construction of new housing, and temporary resettlement of over 5000 residents (Fernandez & Calas, 2011). It is still too early to say whether the ultimate objectives will be met, but because of its scale, the project has been widely studied and has generated criticism, resistance, legal challenges. Amnesty International became published a report intended to provide an overview of the “human rights issues raised by the Kenyan government’s approach to slums and informal settlements” (Amnesty International, 2009). Critics call for further innovation (Anyiso, 2013; Fernandez & Calas, 2011; Mutisya & Yarime, 2011; Otsuki, 2016; Stenton, 2015), noting particular concerns about the balance between socio-economic needs and

basic services as opposed to new housing (Lüthi, 2016, pp. 115–124; Mutisya & Yarime, 2011; Nyabuti, 2015; Stenton, 2015), and concerns about engagement with the community (Cronin & Guthrie, 2011; Ndukui, 2013; Nyabuti, 2015; Rigon, 2014). Community engagement is a challenge partly because of the heterogeneity of communities (Anyiso, 2013; Huchzermeyer, 2008; Lüthi, 2016, pp. 115–124; Muraguri, 2011; Nyabuti, 2015) and partly due to the risks of corruption, local power imbalances, and “elite capture” (Anyiso, 2013; Charbonneau, 2016; Fernandez & Calas, 2011; Rigon, 2014).

The focus of this paper is on a single aspect of the Soweto East initiative—an “entry-point” project designed to build trust in and engagement with the community in order to allow the full project agenda to advance. This entry-point project used an integrated approach to providing urban basic services that explicitly responded to community aspirations. The objective was to establish a hybrid approach that would engage the community and build mutual trust so that the resources of large institutions could be drawn upon.

The entry-point project was led UN-Habitat’s Urban Basic Services, selected because it had a strong records of success with small-scale water and sanitation projects within Kibera. The resulting project was referred to as K-WATSAN (For Kibera Water and Sanitation) but—because the project used an adaptive management approach and relied heavily on interaction with the community—the actual project that evolved was an integrated one addressing a broad array of urban basic services including roads, community centers, and capacity building initiatives. Therefore, to avoid confusion, in this paper the project is referred to as the Urban Basic Services (UBS) project. Because of the scale of the Soweto East KENSUP project, the strategic importance of the UBS project within it, and the importance of contributing to the record of successes in slum upgrading, we undertook to research three questions: 1) what was the discourse in the implementing institutions as the UBS project was conceived and developed, 2) what steps were taken during implementation to engage community support and address community priorities, and 3) what degree of success was achieved through implementation?

## 2. Methods

The methods used for the first two questions—the institutional discourse and the steps of implementation—involved archival research and key informant interviews. For the archival research, records were gathered from KENSUP, UN-Habitat, and Maji na Ufanisi and were collated and reviewed to assess the discourse leading to the genesis of KENSUP and the record of implementation of the UBS project in Soweto East. Key informant interviews were held during May/June, 2012, with individuals from Government of Kenya (KENSUP), the Nairobi City Council, UN-Habitat, Maji na Ufanisi, and with representatives from the community, including members of the Settlement Executive Committee (SEC), the community-based organization Eco-Build Africa Trust, the staff of the Soweto East Resource Centre, and the community at large.

Methods used for the third question—assessing the impact of the UBS in Soweto East—involved further key-informant interviews as well as field surveys, conducted July/August 2012, of 180 people impacted by one major feature of the project, a new access road. Included in the surveys were questions about the respondent’s perception of conditions in Kibera as they were before the start of the project, at the time of the interviews, or were expected to be when all phases of the full KENSUP project were completed. This was intended to gauge satisfaction levels with progress to date, to document levels of trust and optimism about continued progress, and to assess the success of the “entry-point” function of the UBS project.

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