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Urban Services and Child Migration to the Slums of Nairobi

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Summary. — An estimated 30–70% of Nairobi's population lives in informal settlements with very poor access to basic services, yet children are notably absent from the informal settlements. This paper combines qualitative research with three micro data sets and finds that the presence of urban basic services is importantly linked to child residence of migrant parents. This finding is critical for policy debates on slum improvements. It predicts that improvements in services need to be accompanied by appropriate social and educational improvements servicing children and supports recent calls for a more multi-sectoral, participatory, and child-centered approach to urban informal planning.

Key words — informal settlements, urban services, children, slum upgrading, Kenya, Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

Africa has the world's highest average urban growth rate estimated at 3.3% per year during 2000–05 (UN Habitat, 2008a). Nairobi is Kenya's fastest growing city and much like in other regions of rapid urban growth, urbanization in Nairobi takes place in a context of limited urban planning where an overwhelming majority of migrants cannot afford rents in the expensive formal sector and must settle in the city's growing informal slum settlements (Huchzermeyer, 2008). While population estimates of slum settlements are difficult to assess due to their informal nature estimates have ranged from 30% of Nairobi's population to as high as 71% (Gulyani & Talukdar, 2008; UN Habitat, 2003). The poor living conditions in Nairobi's informal settlements are well documented (Adler, 1995; APHRC, 2002; Gulyani & Talukdar, 2010; Lamba, 1994). The lack or limited access to key services such as water systems, garbage disposal, electricity, and proper housing importantly contribute to poor health outcomes among residents, children in particular (APHRC, 2002). The Government of Kenya has recently stepped up its efforts in slum upgrading. The most effective slum upgrading efforts to meet the needs of the urban poor, however, are being debated (Bassett, Gulyani, Farvacque-Vitkovic, & Debomy, 2003; Cohen, 2001; Gulyani & Bassett, 2007; Varley, 2007; Werlin, 1999). Unfortunately, these policy discussions often take place in an environment where not enough consideration is given to the demographic realities and residential strategies of urban migrants. These residential strategies harbor a critical child dimension, which if not considered properly, may limit the long run efficacy of current upgrading initiatives.

The demographic realities of Nairobi slum settlements have been a contentious issue. This was highlighted by the 2009 Kenyan census controversy over the new population estimations of Kibera slum in Nairobi. Often described in media [1] and civil society organizations [2] as one of the largest slums in Africa with up to 1 million residents, the 2009 national census downsized this estimate to 170,070 residents (Karanja, 2010). Furthermore, when discussing the demographic composition, the impression is often left that women and children represent a disproportionate share of the population living in the informal settlements. For example, the website of one of the largest and most successful Nairobi slum youth organizations reports that "over 80% of the families living within the Mathare slums are headed by single mothers [...]" (MYSA, 2011). Similarly, the UN Habitat (2008b) "State of the World's Cities 2010/2011" report concludes in a section describing Kibera slum in Nairobi that "Women bear the brunt of problems associated with slum life," and highlights the large concentration of women. However, the same section also points out that there are surprisingly few comprehensive studies with reliable statistics relating specifically to women.

Through a mixed method approach that combines qualitative in-depth interviews and survey analysis, this paper demonstrates that contrary to such popular representations slum populations in Nairobi are "missing" a significant proportion of children (and their mothers). Information on nonresident children from the Nairobi Informal Settlement Survey (NISS), a detailed household survey on a sub-sample of migrants living in Korogocho and Viwandani informal settlements conducted in 2004, combined with the 1999 Kenyan census data show that more than half the children 0–19 years to migrant heads do not live in the slums and, relative to nonslum areas, children (ages 5–19) are especially under-represented despite the fact that fertility is considerably higher in slum areas. Thirty-one in-depth qualitative interviews with rural and urban families suggested that the absence of these children may be importantly linked to parents' efforts to protect their young children through rural fostering from

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the risks of slum life brought about by poor access to services in the slums. To empirically investigate this hypothesis we link variation in the presence of children in Nairobi households with variation in their access to services. We explore three sources of variation: (i) variation in services between nonformal and formal areas in Nairobi using Kenya National Census Data from 1989 and 1999, (ii) variation in access to services between households within two informal settlements Korogocho and Viwandani using the African Population and Heath Research Centre (APHRC) Demographic Surveillance System (DSS) data from 2003 and 2007, and finally (iii) variation in self-reported comparisons of access to services between the rural home village and Korogocho and Viwandani using the NISS 2004 survey.

The three data sets each point to not only a statistically significant but also a socio-economically large relation between access to basic services and the presence of children. The Kenyan census data show a strong correlation between access to basic services and the presence of children. The DSS data not only confirms this strong link (with regards to services such as electricity, latrines, and garbage disposal), but further show that neighborhood access to services matters, net of individual access. For example, whether households dispose of their garbage in dumpsites or in a public place such as on the road or nearby river does not correlate with the number of children living in that household, but a decrease in the average number of households in the neighborhood disposing garbage in a public place is positively correlated to the presence of children in the household, even after controlling for various explanatory factors. Finally, the NISS data, which collected information on nonresident children, shows how a majority of children to Nairobi migrant parents stay in the rural area, and that this residential decision is similarly strongly linked to parents' evaluations of Nairobi-rural home comparisons in services such as access to schooling.

While some may fear that shifting attention to the underrepresentation of children in Nairobi's slum may discourage public or private investments in children living in the slums, this demographic finding is critical for policy debates on slum improvements as it predicts that improvements in basic services will likely spur a heightened migration of children who will need to be accommodated with the appropriate social services and educational facilities. This finding challenges the recent trends in slum upgrading approaches of implementing small-scale and single sector interventions. It supports recent calls in the literature for a more complex and multi-sectoral approach to urban informal planning (Gulyani & Bassett, 2007), with simultaneous investments in multiple types of services. It contributes to a growing literature seeking to place children more prominently in urban development policy, planning, and practice (e.g., Bartlett, 1999) and the calls for more participatory approaches to urban planning and development (e.g., Bocquier, Otieno, Khasakhala, & Owuor, 2009).

2. CONTEXT

During 1899–1905 the 18 square kilometers that constituted Nairobi, "the place of cold waters," was transformed from a caravan depot to an official town and designated the capital of the British colonial government and the headquarters of the colonial railway. During this period it housed approximately 10,000 residents. Until independence in 1963, Nairobi retained the status of a colonial city. African residents were discouraged (even prohibited) to reside within the parameters of the city through a combination of legal means and by providing limited affordable formal housing and services. The Vagrancy Act, first implemented in 1902, instituted a pass system granting residential access only to those Africans officially employed in Nairobi and authorizing the repatriation of those unemployed back to the rural reserves. This act also authorized the demolition of squatter settlements that were slowly forming to house a growing native population (Macharia, 1992). Such strict laws discouraged family—or joint—migration and the permanent settlement of married women and their children in Nairobi. Families were forced to split, with migrant husbands leaving for Nairobi and their spouses and children remaining in the rural village. In 1911, the effects of the policy were apparent in the demographic make-up of the city's residents, with men outnumbering women by 6 to 1 (Bujra, 1975).

In the years leading up to independence the pass system was abolished and migration policy relaxed, resulting in significant increases in rural–urban migration. In 1962 Nairobi had an estimated population of 350,000 and by 1972 the population of the city had reached half a million (Macharia 1992, p. 228). Nairobi's housing sector was not prepared to receive such a flux of migrants and the new independent government initially tolerated the establishment of informal settlements to accommodate this growing population. In this same year, an estimated one-third of Nairobi residents lived in "unauthorized" housing (Macharia 1992, p. 228). Slum settlements sprung up all over the city, often through informal negotiations or quasi-legal approvals from local authorities, businessmen, or land owners. Many settlements were established adjacent to areas of potential employment and situated on public "empty" lands. These lands were typically in areas considered hazardous for human occupation, such as the deep flood prone valleys of Mathare or the plateau under the electrical power lines of Kenya Power sheltering the people of Viwandani.

Today, Nairobi has an estimated population of over 3 million inhabitants the majority of which are migrants. In 2001, among those living in Nairobi aged 25–54, only between 10% and 15% were actually born in Nairobi, with little differences between men and women (Bocquier *et al.*, 2009, p. 30). The remainder came to Nairobi as migrants with the vast majority—more than 90%—coming to Nairobi *after* the age of 14, underscoring that while many adults of child bearing ages migrate to Nairobi, very few children do (Bocquier *et al.*, 2009, p. 30). As Bocquier *et al.*'s (2009) socio-demographic study of Nairobi highlights, most migrants to Nairobi follow a cyclical pattern of migration. They first come as young adults looking for employment. Male migrants still outnumber female migrants to Nairobi, although females are increasingly migrating too. Long-term unemployed and retirees often return to their community of origin.

As migrants to Nairobi often settle in the growing informal settlements K'Akumu and Olima (2007) estimates that 55% of the population resides here while occupying only 5% of the residential area in Nairobi. Density estimates vary by slum and are subject to difficulties in population estimates, but seem to range between 600 and 2000 persons per hectare (Adler, 1995; K'Akumu, 2007; Kyobutungi, Ziraba, Ezeh, & Ye, 2008; Syagga, Mitullah, & Gitau, 2001). A survey on a representative sample of Nairobi informal settlement residents carried out by APHRC in 2000 showed that the largest ethnic groups are Kamba (16%), Kikuyu (25%), Luhya (25%), and Luo (22%). In the two slums that comprise the focus of this study—Korogocho and Viwandani—the vast majority of residents are also migrants. Most have migrated from rural areas but there is also a significant portion of migrants that have