

The importance of communitarian voluntary association in development cooperation: Kibera and Mathare slums in Nairobi

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Abstract: This paper is the result of two study-trips to Africa, which took place in Kenya between 2012 and 2013. During my first visit I lived in a village called Kiburanga, in the South of the country, while the second time I stayed in the Kenyan slum of Kibera and in particular in Mathare. The report I am presenting in this paper is about my survey in Kibera, which was part of a broad collaborative effort of many individuals; people participating to an association help themselves and the communities, especially in a slum. I'll try to explain what those places really are: «Slums are the physical negation of everything». Infact, as Kapuscinski maintains introducing his research work: «This is therefore a book about Africa, but rather about some people from there-about encounters with them, and time spent together. The continent is too large to describe. It is a veritable ocean, a separate planet, a varied, immensely rich cosmos. Only with the greatest simplification, for the sake of convenience, can we say Africa. In reality, except as a geographical appellation, Africa does not exists».²

Keywords: slums, development cooperation, communitarian associations.

What is a slum?

The world population is 7 billion people today, 50% of which are living in cities;³ this explains the current use of the term *megapolis*. Then we ought to consider that most of the cities with more than 10 million inhabitants are in the Global South. What happens in Africa is that the 61.7% of the sub-Saharan people lives in slums because the urbanization process and the population growth is not controlled by the Southern government (Fig.1). Today⁴, about 828 million people are living in slums worldwide. The term *slum*, or *baraccopoli*, or *bidonville*,

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2. KAPUSCINSKI 1998.

3 UN-HABITAT 2013.

4 *Ibidem*.

or *favela*, or *katchi abadi* is used for a construction with the following characteristics, shown in the picture (Fig.2) too:

- Poor structural quality and durability of housing (fire prone);
- Abusive constructions in marginal areas of big cities;
- Settlements close to a river (lack of water supply) or close to garbage dumps or factories;
- One room per home (every family pay a rent from 400 to 1000 Ksh in Kenya, for example);
- Problems of lack of security of tenure (no legal rights to land, no protection from the harshest weather conditions, hot in summer and cold in winter);
- Insufficient living areas (more than three people sharing a room);
- Poor access to water (3 Ksh per 18 litres in Kenya, for example);
- Lack of sanitation facilities (few public latrines for many people, no sewer, garbage everywhere).

An average lot has about 10 to 40 rooms, or “houses”, but those with ten rooms prevail. On average, the size of the rooms is about ten square meters. It serves to sleep, dine, play, study, for all members of the family; the number of inhabitants in one family varies from 4 to 12, but generally families are composed of 4-5 members. In addition, these rooms are often not only used as “homes” but also as “shops” for subsistence activities, becoming focal points for the local informal economy. Mike Davis⁵ affirmed that modern mega slums like Kibera or Cité Soleil (Port-au-Prince) have touched densities similar to those of herds of livestock but indoors, and he also compared them to chicken coops and anthills. When you enter one of these houses you immediately feel a sense of suffocation. Ventilation is poor, there are few or no windows seeing that the houses are all attached, there is a sweltering heat if it is sunny, there is a musty smell and sense of suffocation even because of the huge amount of objects inside: beds, sofas, carpets, tables, various furniture, blankets, sometimes a television or a radio, paintings, curtains. The plates make the houses stifling in summer and wet in winter. Oftentimes, the sleeping area is separate from the day area by a curtain in the center of the room, and the furniture is moved to provide more

5. DAVIS 2006.

space during the day. If a structure burns – as it often happens and this in fact happened when I was there – it is usually because of the fire used for cooking (on the occasion, in the slum of Mathare, two children who were playing near the fire died). These incidents are not uncommon because people use stoves, fueled by coal or paraffin, in the same room where there are carpets and other inflammable object, which causes the fire to spread quickly.

The city of Nairobi: between Slums and Central Park

Nairobi (44,037,656 million of inhabitants) is a typical, chaotic, similar to a big African city in the West of the continent. The capital of Kenya was born 1899 as a little train yard and it grew into becoming the most important centre of government, considering that, since 1947, 51% of the white settlers⁶ have lived here. Nairobi was, already in the colonial times as it is now, a city of contrasts-contrasts exacerbated by racial, tribal and economic divisions. It was organized in two different cities: the native and the colonial part. In fact, the British *divide et impera* idea focused the attention on separation between white settlers and black natives. African people were considered as only temporary residents during the '50, so there was off-limits real estate and propriety rights for them. Despite their antipathy towards the large native urban settlements, the British were arguably the greatest slum-builders of all time. Their policies in Africa forced the local labor force to live «in precarious shantytowns on the fringes of segregate and restricted cities».⁷

The architecture of the cities was a perfect reflection of the colonial power. Indeed the best lands were taken by colonialists to Africans fight off them from the centre of the city. Nairobi was at first divided in this way:

- North-West of railways: the rich soil where the Europeans lived;
- South-East of railways: a swamp.

It was only in 1948 that the Nairobi Master Plan took place, a few years before Kenya attained independence, and this plan was

6. MARTINELLI 2008.

7. DAVIS 2006, p. 52.

based on a containment strategy meant to prevent the opportunistic immigration into the city and to regulate the access to urban resources. The aim of this plan was to restrict the influx of indigenous Kenyans into the city, following the principle of racial segregation and with the introduction of European, Asian and African residential areas. Shortly before the independence though, there was an expulsion of white settlers, and this was not so much the result of the failure of the plan, but was instead a consequence of the increasing number of slums, which emphasized the inability of governmental and organizational colonial municipal government that resulted in an increase of poverty and squalor. Nairobi is now a big megalopolis. It's the fourth ONU World Centre, the UN-HABITAT headquarter and a big important commercial and helpful centre of all Eastern Africa. But, despite this and according to UN-HABITAT⁸, the percentage of Kenyan urban people that lives in the slums is still 54,7%, which means that more than 1 million of the Nairobi population is occupying just 6% of the land. This is a result of the British colonial heritage and of the very bad government management kept until now. According to Amnesty International⁹, after the Kenyan independence and until today, the slums were considered "eyesore". Because of this, the Kenyan government (who owns all the lands) ignores the international treaties forcing people to leave their homes. Kenya is part of International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) so it is forced to respect and protect home rights (art. 11.1). Nairobi is unique and paradoxical because it's divided between Nai-robbery, a not good appellation, a various slums, and a many big park and museums like Central Park, the Karen Blixen Museum, the AFEW Giraffe Center, the National Museum and others.

The examples of Kibera and Mathare

Kibera, (Kibra means woods in Kiswahili) is the biggest slum in Nairobi (Fig.3) and the second in Africa, after the Durban ones, and it is situated in the middle of the capital. It was born in 1912, after the

8. UN-Habitat 2005.

9. AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2009.

Nubian soldier's transferred here to work for King's African Rifles. The extension of Kibera, as well as the one of other similar areas like Korogocho and Mathare Valley, was also a consequence of the connivance of the local authorities and of the police which conceded illegal permits that allowed people to dwell in the land. Such abusive permits allowed the immigrants to build a one-room shack upon payment of a "bribe", which could be a temporary occupation licenses or a rent agreement. This practice has remained unchanged for a long time, and is still active today. Kibera is located about seven kilometers south-east from the center of Nairobi and covers today approximately 110 hectares. It is divided into two parts, an upper part and a lower part, by the Nairobi-Kisumu railway line. The issue of population has long been debated, both because it is difficult to estimate and because the NGOs and National and International organizations working inside it always tend to "inflate" the numbers for a greater impact and to get more funding. In fact, we usually hear that the population is about one million people, but it is actually estimated to be about six or seven hundred thousand.

Nairobi's second slum, Mathare (Fig.4) was born in 1963 and is now divided in 13 villages: Bondeni, Kosovo, Gitathuru, Mathare 4A, Mathare 4B, Mathare 3A, Mathare Number 10, Mathare 3C, Kiamutisya, Kwa kariuki, Mabatini and Mashimoni Village. It's situated in a suburbs of Nairobi, by the banks of the Mathare River whose waters are useful for people for cooking and washing themselves and their clothes or dishes.

The goal of this paper, as I previously affirmed, is to demonstrate that cooperation exists in slums. In fact, whoever lives (or survives) in slums is stigmatized by his poverty condition and deprived of the free will to decide about a safe home but, despite this, people in slums show great vitality and energy towards themselves and their community and often organize voluntary groups called CBOs: community based organizations. An example of a CBO is Ndugu Mdogo, that I'll try to describe it now.

Demonstration: my experience in Ndugu Mdogo: Rescue Center for

Street Children, (Kibera 2013)

According to the UNESCO, there are up to 150 million Street Children (or *enfants de la rue*) in the world today. They are both girls and boys, from 4 to 18 years old, and live on the streets in gangs. You can identify a Street Child at first glance: outworn and used clothes, secure but timorous face. They are called *chokorà* (rubbish, in *kiswahili*) and they're exposed to street risks such as drug addiction and abuses. It exists different categories of Street Children. There are those who work on the streets as their only way of getting money, those who take refuge on the streets during the day but return to some form of family at night and those who permanently live on the street without a family network. The Kenyan government doesn't show any official data about this big social problem. Ndugu Mdogo (that means small brother in *kiswahili*) is a rescue center for street boys (15-20 boys approx.), where the educator (an ex street child) follows a complex and long educational path with other kids, saving them from the street and its risks (Fig.5). These boys help themselves as well as a strong groups in the centre and can then return to their home (if they have one) after one year almost. The main goals¹⁰ of this Rescue Centre are:

- to promote street interventions and youth empowerment programmes: the social workers identify children living on the street then organize street activities with them as a prelude to a fostering process that gradually moulds them into sound members of the society;
- to support child rescue initiatives: the centre responds to emergencies resulting from street violence, disease, exploitation and drug-related issues; the centre can accommodate up to ten children with emergencies like sickness, abuse by adults and immediate danger;
- to provide in-house care, support and rehabilitation of children in need: for each child, a support program is defined, providing hope through the satisfaction of their primary needs, like a house, counseling, talent development, formation and self-understanding;
- to initiate effective community and parent empowerment systems;
- to raise awareness on street problems and childrens' rights.

10. <http://www.djemme.com/docs/docs-ndugumdogo/ndugumdogo-prjEN.pdf>.

Slums association goals

An association, which simply is the union of people towards a common goal, allows to break the isolation and depersonalization of its members and, in extreme cases, can help people to survive. In particular, the African people usually join together because of their ethnic group, their family, their religion or gender but also because of common objectives. There are many different types of association in slums, but in general they aim to foster for slum dwellers into various educational, cultural and social activities and very often they stand in for the State in many services. There are associations for housing, water supply and sanitation; for schools, health and environment; for women or for street children or multi-purpose cooperative ones. They can effectively ensure the delivery of various development inputs directly to the national management, supporting new advantageous projects for the improvement of slums' awful conditions. In fact, two approaches are needed to realize the famous slum upgrading: top down and bottom up. The top down approaches involve the State:

- to safeguard land and home's property rights;
- to build needed basic infrastructure (roads, sewer, electricity grid, water supply);
- to protect adequate land for new homes;
- to improve private house market for poor families.

The bottom up approaches, on the contrary, are responsibility of the community:

- to achieve house improvements, in cooperation with local community and the available local resources;
- to upgrade local associations.

In Kenya the NGOs have also played a prominent role, replacing the State in its traditional functions, acting as a concrete and active response to the social and economic crises generated by Structural Adjustment Programs imposed on countries in the developing world by the Financial Institutions, and they have sought to support the entire civil society in its struggle from the postcolonial period to now.

Conclusion

Local communities are the basis for slums upgrading. Community Trust should be a process and not simply a goal; the international community hardly understand it while it is essential to involve and listen to local communities. It results to be the only way to improve the development of the social and economic conditions in every country. In my thesis I noted that the mere participation of people in organized groups around mutual solidarity can have a major impact on the life of each member. From this, it follows that the time spent by individuals within a group is always positive, for women and young people more so, since they are more fragile than most grown men, who are often able to find alternative sources of income. The importance of the group is evident both in the economic and social fields. In the first case, it may mean the opportunity to share information, strengthen trade ties and coordinate and cooperate incomes by strengthening the loan system between “equals”: people having no access to the formal labor market can have few opportunities in the informal one and benefit from this. In the second case, for many individuals, among the poorest in the world, a group means wealth as in strength, energy and mutual cooperation.

Groups are essential in Africa because they represent a source of income and aid to survive especially under extreme conditions such as those in the slums. The environment where groups operate is precarious: there is a high probability of rupture of the groups themselves, because of the absence of property rights and because of the high rate of internal and external migration. However, the dependence on a group can often be negative when particular choices by minorities or individuals prevail. In fact, the participation to the group has a cost that can't be neither too high, to allow everyone to participate, or too low, to prevent opportunistic behavior on the part of those who expect it to be a benefit. Thus, the larger is the group of interest, the higher turns out to be its representativeness, the greater the likelihood that the organization does not act alone in the name of their particular advantage. Anyway, a cooperation that only admits the Eurocentric vision and does not put the active participation of the people in first place is deprived of the most valuable tools of community's fight against the difficulties and the pursuit of well-being, such as the force of a union of the people, their knowledge

of their areas and the problems they confront. This approach is called bottom-up because it is inclined to project planning methodologies that involve the beneficiaries of the same project. Certainly, it's not simple to plan bottom-up projects for an entire nation. However, local people shouldn't be just passive targets of interventions, instead should act as active agents. Participating means to influence the decisions that affect the development and not only to be part of the implementation or of the benefits. People necessarily need to be involved, especially because the decisions concern changes in their lives. Precisely for this reason the classical cooperation, the multilateral and the bilateral channels, must be renewed, giving more importance to local governments whose role up to now has been neglected.

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Sitography

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City of Nairobi Map. In evidence: 1: the Kibera Slum; 2: the Mathare Slum

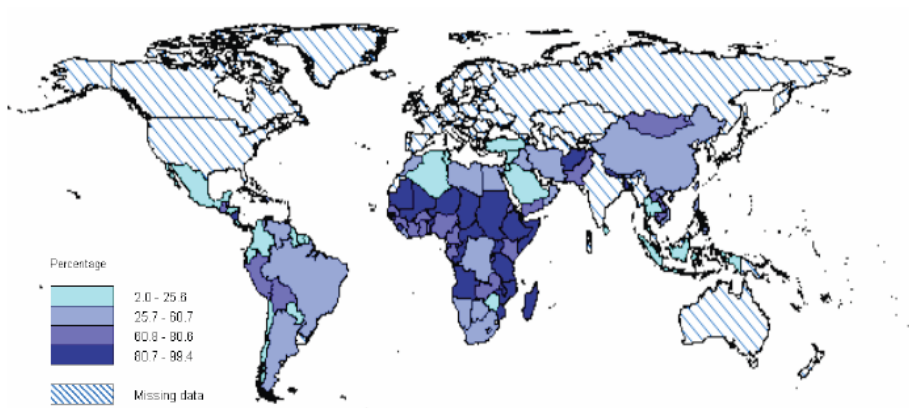


Fig.1. Cfr. UN Millenium Development Goals, database, 2006



Fig. 2 (Photo by Giulia Murgia)



Fig.3 (Photo by Giulia Murgia)



Fig.4 (Photo by Giulia Murgia)



Fig.5 (Photo by Giulia Murgia)