

# **BRIEFING PAPER NO 1: A CONFLICT ANALYSIS OF NAIROBI'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS**

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**YOUTH AND LOCAL LEADERS CONFLICT IN NAIROBI'S  
INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE  
PLAYED BY UNEQUAL ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES AND  
EXISTING MITIGATION MEASURES  
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## **Introduction**

Rapid and massive urbanization, stemming by and large from rural-urban migration has led to mushrooming uncontrolled informal settlements. Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, is a populous and cosmopolitan County, with the bulk of the population found in the middle- and low-income areas of the county, as well as the informal settlements. The informal settlements and low-income estates—Kibera, Huruma, Mathare, Kariobangi, and Korogocho hold the bulk of the youth population. These settlements harbour thousands of youth who not only have little education, but also jobless and, as a result, ignorant of how the order and organization of urban political economy function to the disadvantage of individuals and also collective interests. Because of these attributes—low education, joblessness, ignorance— the youth constitute a catchment population for radicalization by religion-based interests as well as secular interests, and the like.

The population of Kenya is young. The latest census found that the youth population (18-34 years) constitute 13,777,600 (29.0 per cent) in 2019 compared to 11, 809,518 (28.7 per cent) in 2009 (KNBS, 2019). Increasing urbanization has led to a concentration of youth in cities. Due to low levels of education and employability, many of them are compelled to settle and eke out a living in congested slums. At present, the visions and aspirations of young people appear beyond their reach, thus causing frustration and anger (Bilal and Urdal, 2009). Consequently, there has been a rise in disputes between the youth and local community leaders over resource access and distribution. The youth remain particularly vulnerable, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. For those in urban informal settlements, the negative impacts of the pandemic and the resulting government policies have had devastating consequences on their livelihood. As the virus continues to spread rapidly, the more popular measures such as curfews, lockdown, and working from home have overlooked their fate, and they have been left to choose between life and livelihood.

Conflict between the youth and community leaders over resource access, distribution and job opportunities has been identified as a major issue that required action in Nairobi's Kibera, Mathare and Kariobangi informal settlements. Shalom-SCCRR conflict monitoring reports indicate that most opportunities such as road construction happening in the areas were given to people from outside the informal settlements. Over a number of years, Shalom-SCCRR has engaged in continuous conflict monitoring in order to enhance greater understanding of the dynamics of youth-leaders relations in three of Nairobi's informal settlements. In addition to this, conflict intervention experiences which span over 8 years have provided a pool of information which is descriptively discussed in the sections below.

### **Conflict Causes and Dynamics**

Intergroup conflicts are rampant in Nairobi's informal settlements. The existing conflict theory and labeling theory differentiates between vulnerable groups and groups that might engender threats. Disadvantaged groups, especially minorities and the poor who have small deviant behaviors, are labeled as the source of threats by the dominant social group. Dominant social groups are able to minimize these threats through law and enforcement mechanisms. More close observations and interviews in slums in developing countries reveal that a majority of slum dwellers are vulnerable to neighborhood conflicts. There is also the popular perception that the poor are criminals and that slums correlate to violence and poverty worldwide (Alakshendra, 2019) . Our focus group discussions (FGDs) with key opinion shapers in Kibera, Mathare and Kariobangi revealed that due to inadequate space, public facilities, and policing within slums, the neighborhood conflicts stemming from fights for access to resources threaten slum dwellers regularly.

The overarching concern in creating sustainable peace and security in Nairobi's slums is broadly based on the desire to create in those settlements a culture of peaceful co-existence among the residents who belong to different ethnic groups. Mathare, Kibera and Kariobangi are an amalgamation of diverse ethnic groups whose differences emanate from issues such as land, ethnicity and political affiliations. Political tensions are often heightened by negative influence which emanates from the political class and those with interest in political activities. The political class often plays on the people's ignorance and exploit ethnic divisions to incite communities into hating each other. Growing demand over limited resources generates competition and causes conflicts within the villages, posing considerable social and physical risks to the poor who are without adequate representation in the government's decision-making circles.

In much of the developing world, ethnic groups are the strongest and most pervasive social force above the level of family, and ethnic loyalties and interethnic rivalries are the motivation most likely to generate political action among the urban poor. The patterns and dynamics of ethnic politics in heterogeneous societies are complex and fascinating (Nelson, 1979). Mathare, Kibera and Kariobangi sub-counties are very sensitive largely because they either have two dominant communities or are cosmopolitan with different political ideologies and support. This demography leads to the regions becoming a platform for political scheming that set the tone for ethno-political narrative and incitement.

A large proportion of the youths in Kariobangi, Mathare and Kibera cited widespread discrimination based on ethnic origin and nepotism when it came to gaining opportunities to employment. The realistic approach to understanding intergroup conflict holds that conflict occurs between groups when there are objective conflicts of interest involving the relevant groups. One useful typology of the primary drivers of conflict as seen in the realistic group conflict theory identifies three major areas of intergroup incompatibility, namely economic differences, value differences, and power differences (Okombo and Sana, 2010).

Apart from being in slums, Mathare, Kariobangi and Kibera sub-counties have all witnessed violent conflicts involving land, rent, and (in) security issues. For example, Kibera has often experienced land/rent related conflicts over the past years. Kariobangi has also been a scene of violence and criminality which in many cases has led to loss of life and destruction of property. Although these two kinds of violence ended, no proper measures were put in place to check against their re-emergence in future (CRS, 2005).

High unemployment rates and supplementary poverty levels are very mutual among Mathare, Kibera and Kariobangi slum dwellers. The high number of unemployed youth in Kenya compounds conflict risks as indications that the youth easily become militia groups who then reside in various parts of the urban slums to protect particular interests (Ngunyi and Katumanga, 2014).

As a form of self employment, many young men act as hawkers (small-scale street traders) or are involved in the motorcycle taxi business, commonly referred to as boda boda, or matatus (small buses). Groups of young men are well organized and coordinated into youth self-help groups. Despite the fact that this is a form of economic empowerment, there have been many cases where these groups have been party to the execution of violence with the intention of achieving political and even economic interests. Diminished space for self-expression, unemployment, the search for an identity and a sense of belonging are the main issues driving youth vulnerability to violence. Kevin Otieno, a youth leader in Mathare and a member of Shalom-SCCRR peace group observes that, the frontline participation of youth in violent conflict has been blamed on unemployment, the need for survival in a harsh urban setting and illiteracy.

Although these young people are by no means a homogenous group, many are growing up in contexts characterized by rapid urbanization, weak economies, limited educational opportunities, high unemployment rates, pervasive poverty, and other socio-cultural transformations resulting from globalization (Blum, 2007). The realities of the socio-economic environment in which these youth are growing up, thus, may place significant constraints on their development. Youth unemployment still remains a big problem making youth vulnerable to crime and social unrest. Youth, constituting a large portion of the Kenyan population, are particularly vulnerable to manipulation for political violence and radicalization, due to underlying factors such as lack of economic opportunities and limited engagement in political and governance processes.

### **Parties to Conflict, Conflict Actors and Stakeholders**

Shalom-SCCRR conflict monitoring in informal settlements has shown that conflict is inherent between groups within a settlement and between the broader community and the local administration authorities. In general, groups and sub-groups continually form, reform and dissolve within informal settlements. Moreover, the internal rules that a community creates tend to be manipulated by sub-groups as they compete for resources and power. Internal rules are not static but are subject to continual change.

Accusing fingers have been pointed at the government administration in the issue of resource allocation in urban informal settlements. For example, the ‘Kazi kwa Vijana’ — a government initiative which was launched after the post-election violence to create employment opportunities mainly for urban slum youth to discourage them from engaging in violence and criminal activities has been greatly faulted. The initiative is implemented through the collaborative efforts of three government ministries— Youth Affairs and Sports; Roads and Public Works; and Environment and Natural Resources. Under the initiative, youth are recruited for manual jobs including road and bridge repair, and environmental cleanups, earning around Sh300 per day. The project is managed through the provincial administration. From the analysis conducted by Shalom-SCCRR, The implementation of the initiative has not been uniform in all the Nairobi slums. It is comparatively more active in Kibera, where between 700 and 750 youth are involved, compared to other slums where the initiative was suspended after less than a month citing lack of funds. Elsewhere, fewer than 300 youth per slum are Involved in Kazi kwa Vijana, and there are complaints by residents about corruption in the recruitment process (Okomboand Sana, 2010).

### **Youth as Parties**

The findings of the conflict monitoring indicate that the youth in Kibera, Mathare and Kariobangi engage in conflict due to a number of reasons ranging from; social, political and economic factors. On the social findings, poor living conditions, exclusion and inequality, ethnic stereotype comes out clearly to replicate why the youth engage in violent conflict. Economic factors include among others, unemployment while the political factor blamed for conflict includes inflammatory statements from politicians and the role of the security organs.

### **Village Elders**

Under the 2010 Kenya constitution, the most important administrative levels in Kenya are the counties, headed by County Commissioners; the sub county level, headed by Deputy County Commissioners; the wards, headed by Assistant County Commissioners; and villages or locations, headed by Chiefs. In rural areas, a location may cover a vast geographical area but in the cities, populations are dense and locations are smaller in size. For instance, within Kibera there are four locations, each with its own Chief (DPC official A, 2014). According to the Chief’s Act, Chiefs are in charge of maintaining peace and order within their location, and they in turn work with village elders, a position which is recognized by law but is not a salaried position and recruitment is not formalized (for a broader discussion of the political role of Chiefs and elders and how these have evolved over time.

From the analysis of the conflict monitoring reports, conducted by Shalom-SCCRR, in Mathare, Kibera and Kariobangi where affiliations are often rooted in ethnic divisions, there is perceived ethnic favoritism by the wazee wa kijiji (village elders) that is thought to translate into public employment opportunities for the youth in these areas. That ethnic matters to access of resources in Nairobi's informal settlements is hard to dispute, given that affiliations in most of these areas are shaped by ethnic divisions.

### **Politicians**

Politicians' disregard for the needs of administrative institutions is in a class by itself. Preoccupied with their own patronage politics, which feeds on principles that run contrary to those that typically guide a public service, politicians in Africa have ensured that the prospects for administrative reform giving rise to better state performance have been particularly remote (Pierre, 1995).

### **Local Government Leadership**

Community and public participation are still an essential component of current mainstream development interventions, especially in the urban informal settlements. However, elite capture seriously undermines the outcomes of development projects. Much research in the area of urban development studies has shown how state-driven regeneration programs have resulted in displacement and gentrification. In contrast, other studies have shown how communities' self-organize to demand public services, and have praised the collective action of disadvantaged urban communities in pursuit of their own development. Local government leadership influence the pursuit of local communities in safeguarding their interests.

### **SCCRR Peacebuilding and Conflict Mitigation Measures**

Actual conflict behaviour and opportunities for resolving a given conflict are heavily influenced by the characteristics of the involved groups in terms of their identities, degree of cohesiveness, pressure on members for conformity and in-group decision-making processes. Shalom-SCCRR has played an increased role in the conflict transformation process in Nairobi's slums. Since 2012, Shalom-SCCRR has been intervening in Kibera, Mathare, Kariobangi through enhancing the conflict intervention skills, mobilizing communities to initiate grassroots conflict management techniques and implement joint inter-ethnic dialogue forums [www.shalomconflictcenter.org](http://www.shalomconflictcenter.org).

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