

Konferans Bildirisi / Conference Paper

## A Political Economy of Inadequate Housing in Kenya: A Case of Mathare Valley, Nairobi 1920-2022<sup>1</sup>

Kenya'da Konut Yetersizliğinin Ekonomi Politiği: Mathare Vadisi Örneği, Nairobi 1920-2022

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this article is to analyze the 100-year transformation of Mathare Valley settlement in Nairobi City County of Kenya. It answers the question of how the unwanted settlement has found a space for its residents against policy and fiscal odds to survive and provide housing for last one century to an urban poor who were otherwise considered vagrants by municipal authorities. Mathare Valley settlement is a shanty attributable to reliance on the use of readily available and cheap materials such as corrugated iron sheet, carton boards, cast-off timber and plastic sheeting for putting up the structures. The questions of economic rent and 'who would meet the cost of municipal services' rendered to the city in 'unauthorized' Mathare settlement dominated municipal and city council debates up to the 1950s and a legacy held by contemporary political elite. Mathare is a reflection of the resilience of the lumpen in the context of an unwelcome urbanization policy framework relegating it to unauthorized, informality, filth, disease, vagrancy and crime. Notwithstanding these challenges today Mathare is home to 60 % of Nairobians.*

**Keywords:** vagrancy, unauthorized, unsanitary, squalor, agency, self-help

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## Introduction

According to the Nairobi City Integrated Development Plan (CIDP 2018)) housing demand in Nairobi outstrips supply. This gap has led to mushrooming of informal settlements. The private market targets middle and higher income groups, hence leaving the bigger chunk of population in the lower cadres to seek alternative and principally low standard, housing solutions (CIDP 2018–2023, 111). The establishment of informal settlements in Kenya's capital is a response to address poverty and its attendant homelessness and inadequate housing, rife in Kenyan cities.

The Mathare River Valley is one of the many informal settlements in Kenya's capital city, Nairobi. Mathare River Valley settlement is an area of 73 acres of land, appropriately named after the river, Mathare, a valley, or river bank, where the settlement sits. The settlement is located on riparian land, where human encroachment for over a century continues to hedge unforgiving nature. Floods and land slides frequently visit the residents. The settlement is located within 5 kilometres from the Nairobi's central business district and had therefore been an eyesore to the municipal authorities who through fire, bulldozers and brute force have attempted to annihilate the residents and the settlement, arbitrary considering it illegal and informal. In 2019 Kenya Central Bureau of Statistics estimated Mathare Valley's population at 206,564 (KNBS, 2019). Its residents, most of whom earn an average of Kenya Shillings (KES) 10,000 (US\$105) monthly, engage mostly in casual, unskilled, and semi-skilled labor within the community and in the nearby posh estates to eke out a living. They have over time established innovative grassroots and self-help modalities for provisioning necessary municipal services, particularly with regard to putting up structures, water and

sanitation, by pooling together resources and harnessing local systems and knowledge. Although the settlement has existed for 100 years, Mathare Valley is marked by the stark and distinct inadequacy of formal network infrastructure services and still lacks sufficient piped water provision by the state (MSJC, 2019). It therefore represent an imprint of poverty and homelessness, negligence by urban authorities, but on its own the Valley evolved, though vulnerable has remained resilient for over a century of state harassment towards annihilation.

The objective of this paper is to unravel the transformation of the mud and wattle city to the tenements, standing there today, a story of resilience and agency to fight homelessness created by default by the municipal authorities. By use of archival data, empirical research conducted between 2019 and 2022 and expert reports this we analyse the story of the century old valley. Our core argument is that both states have contributed to infrastructural deficit, policy deficiency and the manifest homelessness that is the plight of the residents of Mathare. Years of racial segregation, illegality, declaration of vagrancy and vice, informality, unsanitary, public policy monopoly and open neglect, adoption of neo-liberal policies of the 1990s have cumulatively produced the sum total of what Mathare Valley Settlement is today. Mathare Valley is a story of agency, self-help, resilience and determination to exist in an otherwise adverse and harsh policy environment intended at annihilation and extinction of the unwanted filth, nuisance and poor citizenry in a city carved out for white settler capitalist replaced by a black elite. The story of Mathare represents a microcosm of dependent urbanisation and urbanism in Kenya and in much of Global South cities.

## Mathare Valley: An Urban History of the Century Old Self-Help City

Nairobi, Kenya's commercial hub, started as an administrative centre, for the easy control the Eastern province of the Kenya colony, the epicentre of commercial agriculture production. The name 'Nairobi' was coined from a Maasai word *Enkare nyorobi*, meaning a place of cool waters, serving as an attraction to the early British settlers. The settlement has undergone various phases and faces, a dictate of the economies and politics of the city as well those of the Kenyan state. Today, the Chinese-built Thika Super Highway separates the informal settlement of Mathare Valley from affluent Muthaiga Estate, home, to many who is who of Kenya's political and economic elite. Figure 1 shows some of the structures in the horizon across the Valley.

Settlement in the Valley is zoned into 13 'villages'. The English meaning of a village is a small settlement normally in a rural setting devoid of municipal services such as water, flushing toilets, sewerage, lighting, walking pavements and road network among other advantages of urban life. Mathare though 5 kilometres from the capital city is zoned into villages. John Lonsdale's study on "Town Life in Colonial Kenya" in *Nairobi Today* observes it would be too extreme to suggest that colonial Kenya had an *anti-urban*, as much as as an urban, history....Africans were unwelcome in Nairobi, the 'settler city'. Until the 1950s colonial pass laws and the very limited official provision for housing were designed to constrain single men to generally brief periods of work in towns, as distinct from 'living out their lives there' (Lonsdale 2010 p.36). Barely a decade before independence the British policy reversed, with the aim of separating African peasantries from urban workers who were now permitted the right, if scarcely yet the conditions, to become townspeople.

But the Africans had smuggled themselves into the city as early as the 1920s, and therefore the year 2022 marks a century of Mathare's existence. In 2022 the zones in Mathare Valley are: Mashimoni, Mabatini, Village No. 10, Village 2, Kosovo, 3A, 3B, 3C, 4A, 4B, Gitathuru, Kiamutisya, and Kwa Kariuki, collectively covering an area of approximately 0.42 sq. kilometers. The villages are aptly named after administrative heads, chiefs while some names are reflective of the dominant ecological condition, such as valleys or rugged gaping hollows, *Mji wa Huruma* (Kiswahili for City of Mercy), *Thayu* (Kikuyu for peace) and *Kaburini* (Kiswahili for cemetery), among others. Alternatively, names are adopted from the criminal and conflict-laden environment, such as Kosovo, and Nigeria because of fraudulence, among other names mirroring what is characteristic of neighbourhood.

African labour was desirable to be retained in the then created labour enclaves, 'reservoirs' on the hinterlands of the capital city, for optimal utilization and realization of the economic imperative of Kenya's colonization by the British. In the early colonial period up to 1920, Nairobi constituted people of mainly European and Asian origins. Some of the earliest Asian capital was obtained this way in areas which latter came to be fashionable districts of the city (Hake, 1977, 173-6). The Asians occupied Pangani and Ngara areas of colonial Nairobi while the blacks were left to take the Eastlands, where Mathare is located. The local government, which was initiated in 1900, was geared towards solving the problems of European and Asian settlers, among them the planning of a bazaar, street lighting, unplanned shops, characterized by absence of well lit streets, conservancy, refuse collection, policing and general impoverishment of the population. It was assumed there were no Africans in the city in as much as they worked as domestic



Figure 1. The Valley: Structures in Horizon

Source: Researcher 2022

servants in the White and Asian areas. By 1906, the railway depot had expanded to a town of 11,000 people living and working within one and half miles of radius of the government offices. The early African

immigrants into Nairobi remained unwelcome in the white and Asian-dominated city except as domestic workers premised on racial municipal law that Nairobi was not for the redundant natives'. However,

in the first two years after World War I the city witnessed an increase in the population of all races in Nairobi, a rise occasioned by the demobilized soldiers, members of the Carrier Corps (corrupted in African languages to today's *kariokor*, a leading market in Nairobi), who provided military labour and a group of African immigrants, especially men from the rural areas seeking employment. It is against this backdrop that Africans created a niche for themselves in city through innovation, and bypassing of municipal authorities, which we now turn to.

Mathare Valley is also known as the self-help or *harambee* (Kiswahili for pooling together for collective assistance) city, having been built of African agency and initiative. The Municipal Council of Nairobi, concentrated on providing modern housing for those well above the poverty line, viewing the shantytowns as filth on the city landscape. Yet despite the constraints of racial segregation Nairobi became the first municipality with a mixed-race municipal council. The Asians living in Pangani abandoned Pumwani, which they had quarried for years. It is in this dereliction that Mathare was founded. The African migrants mainly the African railway and domestic workers rented quarry land from Indians in as much as the City Council of Nairobi continued to discuss the possibility of destruction of 'African Housing' outside the Native Location of Pumwani (Etherton, 1971, 10). Using readily available materials the immigrants started settlement along rivers Mathare and Gitathuru. Also, the completion of the railway many more Africans migrated to occupy Mathare and on fringes of the railway line. The township administration, citing its fear of rising crime as a result of the city's burgeoning unemployed population, requested the government to help control the African influx into the city. Starting at a population of around

300 Mathare Valley settlement grew exponentially to today's Kenya's second largest informal settlement after that of Kibera. The absence of basic amenities defined the shanties. The informal shanties were places with one standpipe water tap and one latrine block for every 100 people. Nairobi continued to grow, attaining the status of a municipality, providing a political space where identity politics based on class and race was to be manifested. This identity politics based on race, informed all other political contestations that followed within Nairobi during and after colonial period as we shall note in the remainder of this article.

Colonial urbanization which denied Africans 'citizenship', at city hall discriminative legislations were enacted to suppress and oppress both the native men and women. The Africans were thrown into oblivion in the running of Nairobi's Municipal affairs to the detriment of their urban environment. The municipal laws were to stifle the influx of Africans into the city to the anger of the few elite Africans in the Municipality. A myriad social and economic challenges affected Africans in the city. The Municipal African Affairs Department was concerned that there were no strategies for dealing with the unemployable and criminal African cases. African housing was also inadequate as more Africans were moving into the city to live with their kins. Law enforcement ensured that the vagrants and beggars, who found their way into the city were forcefully returned to the reserves. (KNA/RN/1/148: City Council of Nairobi: Beggars and Vagrants 1959-1966). But the resilient spirit of the migrants did not succumb. It is imperative that we address the legality of land tenure in the Valley to authenticate claims on the shanties and the rents charged by some of the structure owners.

As the influx of Africans into the city continued unabated, complex land ownership and claims emerged and sustained. Land ownership in Mathare Valley is still mixed. Land in Mathare Valley belongs to the state, the urban rich and poor. In Mathare Valley there are about 496 acres of land, of which 34% is owned by the state, 8% by the Nairobi City Council and the rest by individuals, companies and cooperative societies (Etherton, 1971, 9). Until 1969 when cooperative societies began buying private land, Mathare villages were built illegally on land in all three types of ownership (*Ibid*). To date there are 'structure owners', who built and own shacks, temporary in nature owing to shaky claims to ownership on which they sit. There are also squatters who live in structures they have put up themselves, on land that they do not stake claims to. In the latter case any land perceived as idle and unoccupied, mainly be public land has been seized by the poor who put up homes, knowing too well they can be evicted at any time. They are the most vulnerable to forced displacement, evictions, bulldozers and harassment from the City Council *askari kanjo* (infamous City Council security officers). Many residents have encroached into the river way putting up temporary shanties of corrugated iron sheets, polythene bags and carton boards on land that they do not legally hold ownership to.

Available evidence shows that land belonged to the government and was under utilized which many seized to put up structures for habitation. Politicians are the chief grabbers of the land. Some live in the vicinity for the sake of ensuring that tenants do not end up ousting them and taking up land ownership, whose claims and contestations are rife. In Kenya it is common knowledge that landlords can accumulate capital from leasing land and structures in slum areas in Nairobi is hardly a new discovery. One still wonders how

a rich political class has been allowed to make profits from the poor in the under serviced and insecure settlement schemes. But that is the history of that makes Mathare Valley settlement, an answer to poverty and desperation of a lumpen class, a byproduct of dependent capitalism. It is on this flax land ownership script that the 100-years old valley was built by anyone who intended to stake a claim to Valley of poverty.

By the 1930s a black informal set up was taking shape and providing 'shelter' to a sprawling population of the unwelcome African immigrants, a constellation of individuals of little means in paid employment, casual labour, or in self-employment as traders, hawkers, artisans, food vendors, cobblers, illegal brewers, prostitutes and market-women. We note that there existed a blurred line between the last two categories. Using daub and wattle, Kikuyu men and women made homes for themselves. The single rooms were of between 6 and 10 metres in size, adequate to accommodate the males, who left their families in the rural areas, reserves where they worked on the farms providing a subsidy to the meagre wages of their male husbands. For purposes of stretching the income earned from the informal sector self-employment men who rented the rooms lived in this space with friends and shared the rent as tact to survive the economic realities of city life. With time many landowners expanded the housing schemes to make profits from this lucrative enterprise but did not care to increase the size of the housing unit rooms. Notably, there were only a few authorized houses in the area due to a lack of sanitation and waste disposal services. The municipal authorities turned a blind eye to the shanties and did not adjust laws to allow even for rudimentary services to be supplied in these so-called African areas. Any unoccupied space in the river bank and quarry was grabbed by opportunistic

individuals in utter disregard to themunicipal by laws or the environmental safeguarding the riparian land.

Nairobi was confirmed as the capital city of Kenya in 1950, and was divided into seven distinct zones, a consequence of the British 'plan for a settler capital' which enhanced discrimination, enclaves and spatial limits to the interest and advantage of Europeans. Nairobi Municipality was divided into six wards for European representatives and seven for Indian representatives up until by a Royal Charter it attained city status.

### **Antecedents to the Sprawling of Mathare in Independent Kenya, 1964-1985**

Simultaneously, as Nairobi gained the status of a city, the Mau Mau liberation struggle was underway. Subsequently, many of the outlawed Mau Mau fighters found a hideout in the Valley. The illegality and informality of the Valley was ideal for these operatives, who hid weapons and conducted oathing ceremonies her e to the chagrin of the colonial authorities. This accentuated the anger of the municipal authorities who had better justification not to allow, facilitate urban life for the Africans. Adjacent to the affluent Muthaiga white residence, Mathare was razed down in 1954. Threats and acts of arson as well as planned bulldozing by city authorities did not kill the resilience of the residents of Mathare, who re-inhabited it in 1958 turning the Village into a sprawling slum by 1962.

After independence, many people were left landless as Kanogo succinctly observes 'it was enough to destroy white supremacy but not enough to realize the peasant dream' (Kanogo, 1987, 181). Without land and shelter most of them came to

Nairobi to look for employment. Unfortunately, there were no jobs. With limited industries, the labour absorption was so low to accommodate the high levels of immigrants into the city. This forced some to return home, while others seized and settled on government and underutilized seemingly idle land. They erected low-cost shanties for shelter. Informal labour opportunities were common, as construction sites begun to spread across Mathare. The newcomers joined the old trade of brewing commercial *changaa* and *busaa* (illicit brews). In Mathare possibilities for menial jobs employment and outlets for the sale of illegally brewed beer and spirits existed at the Air Force Base, the Police Lines and in the surrounding housing areas. Others started small food kiosks, green groceries as well as hawking (Etherton, 1971, 10). From the 1950s through the 1960s Africans made attempts at making their lives comfortable in the capital by putting up shanties to call home in fear of facing the Beggars and Vagrancy by laws instituted by the city authorities.

On the eve of independence the colonial state whetted the desire of Africans to equally inhabit the city. As Luise White in her book *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* observes, the East African Royal Commission formed to de-racialize Kenya, recommended "wherever possible Africans should be encouraged to own their own houses", a call that was fastly followed by the shooting and sprawling of slums in Mathare, Dagoretti, Dandora, Huruma, Korogocho, Kibera, Kawangware and Mukuru, among others, across the City. Another factor contributing to this surge in city populations was an increase in wages in the late 1950s and the overcrowded conditions of Nairobi's legal African housing resulted in a vigorous expansion of squatter settlements starting slowly in 1958-1959 and getting into an explosion in the early 1960s.

The first acts of towards controlled urbanization by Kenya's independent government included a state-orchestrated fire aimed at clearing shanties in Mathare, a move that was vehemently resisted by the opposition party thus allowing the Village to survive as home to the growing class of the poor in Nairobi. Thus, Mathare burgeoned into a 'city'. throughout the 1970s through various initiatives. Self-help efforts complemented by those by the government made a way for building and improvement of authorized African housing. More than 7,628 single room-units were planned on cooperative basis. The architects of rebuilding Mathare intended to have all heads of households involved in an all inclusive projects of investment but shackles of poverty denied a majority from contributing shares in the building cooperative. Some of the villages collected contribution from the villagers as a tax. The headman of each village worked through the chief and District Officer (DO). Government administration has always been more sympathetic with the the problems of Valley than has been the City Council although both have now accepted the view that physical and social improvement are necessary ignored and out of sight and mind of the municipal until companies started buying and acquiring loans to upgrade the housing rural villages in pattern and layout toilets are on the edge and there is an access road in Village II. Notably, as is the norm in any capitalism setup, some of the richer residents in the Valley bought more shares, resulting in more than one allotment or plot, on which they later put up tenements. To say the least the support of government however has been inconsistent and too little at times. Delayed funding as well as delivery of technical staff in the upgrading programme were commonly reported, impacting timely implementation and completion of programmes on schedule.

In independent Kenya exclusion of informal settlements from formal systems and services continued and was normalized. Normalization of violence as a form of exclusion of residents of informal settlements has been evident in the threatened and actual demolition of homes; extortion and harassment of residents; lack of police presence followed by periodic and violent police raids; land conflicts and tenure struggles; corrupt government or police presence; and violent electoral protests orchestrated by politicians. The unrelenting spirit of the Mathare Valley residents continued throughout the 1970s and to the present. Though not so comfortable or ideal for modern cities, Matharians were better off than their rural folks, by any measure, a factor that contributed to a steady influx of many Kenyans and other Africans (Uganda and Nigeria) into the city in albeit African housing and provisioning of services was 'out of sight and mind' of the city planners, which we now address in the next section.

It is our submission that urban governance and planning largely is to blame for the appalling conditions in Mathare. It is documented that the colonial government remained sympathetic of the plight of the residents Valley but the City Council of Nairobi (CCN) remained unconcerned of what happened to the residents. Throughout its historical development, Nairobi has been described as a metropolitan city harbouring a cosmopolitan population with diverse identities ranging from race, religion and ethnicity to class, gender among others. Yet, the CCN instituted measures to wade of the city from filth and crime through bylaws to curtail begging and vagrancy. As early as the late 1950s and through the 1960s, vagrancy and begging proved a headache to the City authorities in Nairobi compelling the Ministry of Local Government, being the one responsible for the running of county and



municipal affairs to issue a Vagrancy Act in 1965, which defined a vagrant thus: any person having neither lawful employment nor lawful means of subsistence such as to provide him regularly with the necessities for his maintenance or any person having no fixed abode and not giving a satisfactory account of himself and for any purposes of this paragraph, any person lodging in or about any verandah [sic], pavement, sidewalk, passage, outhouse, shed, warehouse, store, shop or unoccupied building, or in the open air or in or about any cart or vehicle, shall, without prejudice to the generality of the expression “fixed abode”; or any person wandering abroad, or placing himself in any public place, to beg or gather alms; or any person offering, pretending or professing to tell fortune, or using any subtle craft, means or device by palmistry otherwise to deceive or imposes upon any person; or any person living or lodging in any place or area which the Minister for the time being responsible for health has declared, by notice in the Gazette, to be unfit for living in. (KNA/RN/1/148: City Council of Nairobi: Beggars and Vagrants 1959-1966). In accordance with the Act, any vagrant authenticated as being a one by the court and it was satisfied ‘he is a citizen of Kenya and has a home, ordered him to be taken to the district in which his home was situated and not he was not to leave that district for a period of three years thereafter unless he has been issued with a permit in accordance with section 6 of this Act’. Further it was recommended under the same Act that the police prosecute beggars not for begging but because of obstruction.

Mathare Valley and its residents fit into these various categories of vagrancy, as people lived in riparian areas prone to floods, landslides, vagrancy defined lifestyle for the homeless in the settlement and many did not have any identifiable form of earning an income. The Town Clerk alerted

the Mayor that ‘to my mind the police have all the power necessary to ‘harass’ these people and, if they are unwilling to do so, or the council to attempt it, may well be a case of fools rushing in. Authority to harass these people a nuisance who are on thoroughfares and the local papers are criticizing the CCN for its ineffectiveness efforts to deal with vagrancy so harass by city inspectorate till they go to the rehabilitation in Bahati Home in the estate for the aged and disabled. By use of vagrancy Acts, Nairobi was to be kept clear of the poor beggars and vagabonds being the ‘settler capital’ it was planned to be. Being in close proximity to the central business district (CBD), the poor in Mathare could beg on the city streets and return to sleep in the open spaces or in incomplete buildings. To date many street families have make-shift homes in Mathare. They sleep in open spaces, then walk to the city to beg, engage in petty crime and walk back to the Valley to rest for the night.

As such there was no plan to include the residents of Mathare in the provision of services by the City Council whatsoever. The people resorted to ‘self-help’ effort to create their own spaces in the city. They raised funds from friends and relatives, donors and churches to make Mathare what it is today. Efforts to assist the residents were seen in the late 1960s, when the CCN resorted to making improvements on the mud and wattle structures. The structures in 1969 were as shown in Figure 2.

Similarly social amenities were built of the same temporary materials as houses as exemplified in Figure 3.



Figure 2: Mathare Valley Structures in 1969

Source: *The Sunday Post* March 9 1969

### Mathare Site and Service Housing Scheme

Among the myriad of challenges experienced by the residents of Mathare were those relating to suspect fires which razed down the Valley and the unsanitary conditions, subjecting the residents to many health hazards as well as high levels of crime and criminality. For instance, in December 1968 and June 1969 fire razed down Kaburini (Kiswahili for cemetery), an area occupied by squatters one of the villages in the Valley. By 1971 the scale of this type of settlement had been effectively limited by repeated demolitions and burning by the Nairobi City Council (NCC) (Etherton, 1971, 8). The reality, however, was that these areas were re-built as soon as they were demolished, an indication of the persistence of this section of the population in providing itself with shelter close to the best opportunities for casual employment. The construction of these temporary shelters was with layers of paper and cardboard scrap tied to a wooden frame. An outer covering of polythene sheet or sacking was

also common. To evacuate the people they were relocated in the neighbouring Karura Forest, where they were faced with severe human security challenges resulting from a loss of income. They could not afford food, and cooking energy for instance, subjecting them to further distress while their children dropped out of school.

Compassion of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) was extended to the evacuated families. The Church Council observed that fire hazard and health risks were now even greater in Karura Forest than they were at the old Kaburini site granted that they had been removed far from their former sources of income and could not fend for themselves. Of the City Council's act of evacuating the Mathare fire victims to *Mji wa Huruma* (City of Mercy), the Church Council observed:

Although your council is generously providing food, the people are lacking a number of important items such as charcoal, paraffin and tea. This council is continuing to cooperate with the Family Welfare Sec-

tion of your council, whose efforts to relieve the suffering of the displaced people are most commendable. May I urge, however, that the steps to resettle the people should proceed at the earliest opportunity. The NCKK has made available the services of two staff members and the details of the November 1969 survey of Kaburini are also available to assist your council in determining which are genuine Kaburini residents without alternative places of residence. To maintain these people at *Mji wa Huruma* is both costly and unsatisfactory, and I therefore look forward to hearing of your plans to re-settle the people, so that we may do our utmost to cooperate with you in assisting their rehabilitation. (KNA/RN/6/24: City Council of Nairobi, Development of Mathare Valley 1969).

In a prompt response to end the suffering of the homelessness so created by the City Council fires, the Secretary General of the NCKK, one John P Kamau wrote to the Town Clerk highlighting the myriad challenges being experienced by the residents of the Valley, primarily frequent fire out-

breaks, high levels of crime, drunkenness and illegal brewing and its trade (KNA/TR/8/1215: Huruma Cooperative Savings and Credit Society Limited, 1971). Further, the Church Council took it upon itself to rebuild shelter for the Mathare homeless. Following the initiatives of the Church Council, City Council authorities took the cue and invested albeit sluggishly in upgrading the Valley to some degree as we delve into now.

By 1969 there were 20-30000 people squatting in the Valley according to City Engineer writing to Ms. Donna Haldane, a social worker from the NCKK to consider what to do to them. After a Housing Study Group on homelessness in the Valley she embarked on fundraising in the USA for the upgrading of the Valley. She advised the City Council on a three-pronged approach of recognition, aid and progressive improvement policy, which worked in future alongside tangible help from the people themselves or others, funding the capital costs of the policy. The NCKK's years of education and and pub-

Figure 3: Children at Play in a Nursery School



Source: *The Sunday Post* March 9 1969

licity on the squalor of housing caught the eyes of the City Council and the Ministry of Housing, who admitted that there was need to demolish what poor residents had called 'homes', with few and blocked latrines. The Ministry of Housing writing to the CCN raised concern that "The had made available to the City Council of Nairobi some funds towards the first experiment on the kind of houses to be built for the people of Mathare Valley, which was its brain child after it visited on 4 June 1969 and made certain promises to help the Mathare Valley people regarding their housing problems". Further, the Commissioner of Squatters endorsed 79 acres of land to be set aside for the settlement of Kaburini squatters of 1969 fire, an act of arson that was highly suspected to be municipal-engendered to repulse the immigrants from rural Kenya to forfeit urban life by rendering them homeless. Evidently, by 1970 the government appeared to be softening its pedestal and hence authorized African settlement in the Valley and/or it was giving up on its efforts to end what was previously considered unauthorized settlement in the unsanitary conditions of the Valley.

The NCKK had spent two years talking about the educational and social work in the Valley on the need for them to plan for their future and request for need to see the need for the improvement of amenities for the people in Mathare Valley. This yielded as finally advice from the NCKK gained the City Council's approval. Further, the policy that NCKK obtained funds through Ms. Haldane was to be channeled through NCKK but the CCN. By sharing the burden of building one-room units, the money was contributed as follows £40,000 made to Uhuru and Kariobangi low cost housing from National Housing Corporation (NHC) and another £50,000 for the Mathare Valley project in February 1970. (KNA/RN/6/24: City Council of

Nairobi, Development of Mathare Valley, 1969).

The CCN quickly embarked on surveying of the land, approval of designs and building materials. Mathare posed peculiar engineering problems owing to the the landscape, quarrying, river bed and the rugged nature of the surface. The upgrading was done using the earth bricks as low cost local materials for construction on site six proto-type units. After experimentation it was resolved that earth blocks were the most appropriate to use as they would add value to the pilot project. However, the ensuing power struggle and contestations between the Ministry of Housing and the City Council authorities clearly played out and delayed solving the housing problems in Mathare as the following memo suggested:

It would be unfair for the City Council of Nairobi to spend government funds on the Mathare Valley re-development scheme without also bringing the Ministry into the picture on the groundbreaking ceremony on 15 December 1969. The problems being encountered in the City Council of Nairobi cannot be resolved and hence there is no need to highlight by giving more publicity. (KNA/RN/6/24: City Council of Nairobi, Development of Mathare Valley 1969).

The case of Mathare Valley housing is one of hybridity, sourcing funding from diverse actors. With the assistance of Church Council and other religious bodies the CCN agreed to the idea of 'alleviation of the 'slum' housing problem in the Mathare through loans and grants solicited locally and internationally. Armed with KES 443 820; KES 137, 310 being a grant to the CCN and a loan of KES 306, 510 payable over nine years CNN embarked on the upgrading scheme. The CCN agreed to contribute amenities including water

supplies, sewerage, latrines and roads for the Mathare Valley Programme valued at KES 200,000 on 1 October 1972. It was recommended to the CCN for funds to be set aside to have each individual plot connected to the main sewer and water. As such the CNN 1973 Development Plan included Mathare slum upgrading. The upgrading programme included the assistance of the government to qualified landlords, who were allocated land to build. To this end in 1973 the City Director of Social Services wrote to the Commissioner of Lands pleading to with the government that the people on the list had been squatters in Mathare for a period of more than two years as squatters and now qualified to be allocated land and be issued with title deeds. With evidence of land ownership this would be used as collateral to secure loans from commercial banks, various employers such as the Kenya Bus Service (KBS) and the National Housing Corporation (NHC), among others. Evidently at least 102 residents were allocated land and issued with title deeds. (KNA/RN/6/69: Development of Mathare Valley 1971-1973).

The social work unit was working close to the community in the valley and identified how dire and desperate the housing condition was a subject of congestion and dilapidation owing to the municipal authorities untoward negligence considering African occupied areas as illegal, informal and could not warrant provision of municipal services. The Site and Service Scheme partially addressed the problems of provided housing in the 'depressed area'. It would be impossible to totally eliminate homelessness and congestion in housing in the Mathare. As the up grading was continuing an influx into the city continued especially for newcomers, the hope was to be included in the up grading programme. It took scrutiny of the directorate of social services and the local administra-

tors to authenticate the genuine squatters and recommend them for land allocation. By the end of phase one around 110,000 people or 17 of the entire city people, had had been allocated home. But the deficiency remained. Much more needed to be done. Another 30,000-40,000 residents were moved into newly serviced areas from other parts of the city and the squatter upgrading project continued. This projection was quickly surpassed as the newly rehabilitated houses served as an attraction to more migrants and the newly rehabilitated houses could not match the demand for housing. On 12 July 1976 Nairobi Town Clerk wrote to the Commissioner of Lands cautioning that the housing problem in Mathare was too complex:

To be resolved in one formulae yet its so complex he captured it thus: population growth here is fastest greater than anywhere in the city growing at 10% pa. In my opinion the problem is that we apply theoretical and abstract formulae to what is really a complex human problem. No one form of development can work for Mathare. Flexible plan to accommodate plans, we should allow high class development near the road, where there are companies capable of construction even without over reliance on the CCN funds. Rezone by laws allow quarter acres, allow and encourage owners to build houses and in cases of upgrading to proceed. Those with tenure deeds to be allowed to seek aid elsewhere not necessarily from the CNN in order to be able to develop their plots. (KNA/RN/6/69: Development of Mathare Valley, 1971-1973).

Moving forward his recommendation being 'we should create a 'bee hive of activity' in Mathare Valley so that the versatility of the people with the encouragement of the Member of Parliament (MP) and the councilors championing the course can lead to the re-development so much

required. It is through such efforts that houses were built. By 1977 it was estimated that there were around 472 units in Mathare, capable of addressing the high density population in the area. By the end of the 1970s owing to the persistence of the squatters, the landlords, well wishers, the church and some government officers some efforts were underway towards the rehabilitation of the Mathare Valley Settlement. Congestion in the Valley was and persists obvious as shown in these rows of houses and note the narrow open spaces in the labyrinth in Figure 4.

These collective efforts paid dividends as eventually most villages in the Valley was up graded to some degree of decency and dignity. Where land ownership disputes persisted the upgrading was delayed, as such the shanties remained as it were and threats of arson, bulldozing and evictions continue to date. It is not uncommon to find people sleeping in the open as vulnerabilities of fire and forced displacement occur. People with more resources invested in the tenements as shown in Figure 5. The rents charged for the storey buildings are much high, ranging from KES 3500 to 5000 and theretofore way beyond reach by the poor in the Valley. With an income of KES 10, 000 it would be illogical to commit to rent of about a third of this income. Therefore many residents of the Valley prefer to live in the shacks where rent can be as low as KES 1500 if not lower. Many who are engaged in informal and casual jobs in the neighbouring estates such as Muthaiga, Ridgeways and Thome cannot afford rent charged in the tenements. The tenements are mainly on the Eastern side of the Valley neighbouring the Moi Air Base and Kariobangi Light Industries, presenting more formal job opportunities to the residents in the Valley. As one of the Town Clerks in Nairobi had rightly projected, the demand for housing in Mathare could not go by a one size fits all. As shown in

various figures in this article valley holds both tenements and bungalows, houses of mud and wattle, tin and wood and in the centre are carton board houses. The complex structures today and myriad designs pose a pragmatic responsive to varying pocket sizes of the Valley residents. Figure 5 captures at least three different housing types within the same neighbourhood in Mathare North.

Another aspect of poverty that the people in Mathare live in is vulnerability to natural disasters. As the land was reclaimed from a quarry dereliction the risk of land slides is real and intermittent. The dangers of landslides since the houses are at the bottom of overhanging land posing a danger to the occupants as represented in Figure 6

The upgrading of the slum had included the connection of the Mathare to the water and sewer of the larger city. However, as we have noted the contest between the concerned ministry and the relevant city council authorities, the Valley has never fully been integrated into the network of the CNN. All along the provision of water and sewerage to the people of the valley has never been prioritized by the CCN. The dominating concern being who would bear the cost emerged at one time exchanging in their official correspondence 'worse still we cannot allow water to be used in the ablution block 'for who will pay for it'? (KNA/RN/1/163: City Council of Nairobi: Housing General 1978-1981). The intrigues of all these are about a City not interested in providing essential services to the residents, that it concerned the Treasurer that storm water, which would be available for free to the residents, would curtail profits and deny levy to the council is telling of the motive of the city fathers. That, even so late in the day, the independent state still considers urban life for the rich middle class who are able to pay uti-

lity bills. The poor should remain homeless or take up shelter in the under serviced areas. Town Clerk cautioned 'I think you are also aware of the city council's strenuous efforts currently being made to assist the very poor people in the city, among other things. Little wonder that frequent outbreak of cholera and other water borne diseases in Mathare were common such that the cholera scare of 1973 could not be far-fetched. (KNA/RN/6/23: Mathare Valley Site and Service Settlement Scheme 1976-1978).

Water remains a challenge to the residents of the valley as the CCN has never considered it a priority to connect the residents to its network of supply. Subsequently, residents may fetch water by foot, animal-carts, or hand-pushcarts from neighboring locales with piped water supply, or purchase water from delivery vehicles including tanker trucks or the popular motorbikes (boda boda). In a recent debate for the contestant for the Nairobi gubernatorial seat, it was amazing to learn that some people in Eastlands of Nairobi have never taken however, rather they bath

from 'bottom up' that small amounts of water contained in a plastic basin is what they use to wash their bodies. This water drawn from the river Mathare river. Water is a precious commodity in the Valley as it is controlled by cartels, who collude with the municipal authorities to deny some areas water and supply others. Water kiosks are run by people who store water in tanks and manually dispense it to residents at a fee of between shillings 2 and 5 for a 20-liter jerrycans. Whenever there is a shortage of water when the Ndakaini and Sasumwa Dams, the main sources of water for Nairobi City, dries up during the dry spell, water can retail for as much as Sh. 30 for a 20-liter jerrycan. Another alternate source of water in the Valley is that which is dispensed from automated teller machines (ATMs), water that is used by a small proportion of the residents. Accessible supply is from water kiosks, as captured in Figure 7.

Inadequacy in refuse collection service, too, has to date prevailed owing to the absence of a policy during the colonial period, a period that has persisted to date.

Figure 4: Labyrinth Site and Service Upgraded Structures of the 1970s Standing to date



Source: Researcher 2022



Figure 5: The Various Structures in the Valley Today

Source: Researcher 2022

Since the 1970s the CCN has not consistently managed to avail dustbins and collect garbage in a routine. Though the responsibility of the house owner is fully explained on CCN and owners on the centralized bulk refuse collection areas this does not happen. (KNA/RN/6/23: Mathare Valley Site and Service Settlement Scheme 1976-1978). To date mounds of

uncollected garbage litter the Valley, producing fumes of foul smell. During the time of data collection, a fierce battle ensued between law enforcement agents and the youth in Mathare, over the intention to fence off land had been used as a dumpsite for the residents. In the usual land grab style, private developers had started fencing off the garbage collection site, an

Figure 6: Vulnerabilities to Landslides



Source: Researcher 2022



intrusion that was not taken lightly by the residents. For a whole week battles ensued as the residents protested against the acquisition of land and garbage site. Residents scavenge through the mounds looking for scrap metal which they sell to earn a living. Indeed it is a form of employment for street urchins, the youth but entire families subsist by the garbage site which they jealously guard. As always the residents fight back any efforts to change the status quo and exercise a collectivist attitude towards their existence and rights to survival. In Figure 8 shows evidence of scavenging by animals and human in the Valley.

## Contemporary Mathare Valley 1986-2022

The capitalistic Kenyan economy ensures that the private market targets middle and higher income groups, hence leaving the bigger chunk of population in the lower cadres to seek alternative and principally low standard, housing solutions (CIDP 2018-2023, 111). UNICEF (2018) estimates that 80 % the population in Mathare is unemployed or are in insecure jobs. This renders most of them economically vulnerable. As such they reside in shanty-like accommodation described as informal settlements consisting of roughly constructed mud, tin or wooden one-roomed huts without electricity supply as well as sewerage system. Access to water is usually from a single shared tap, typically serving more than 100 dwellings. On

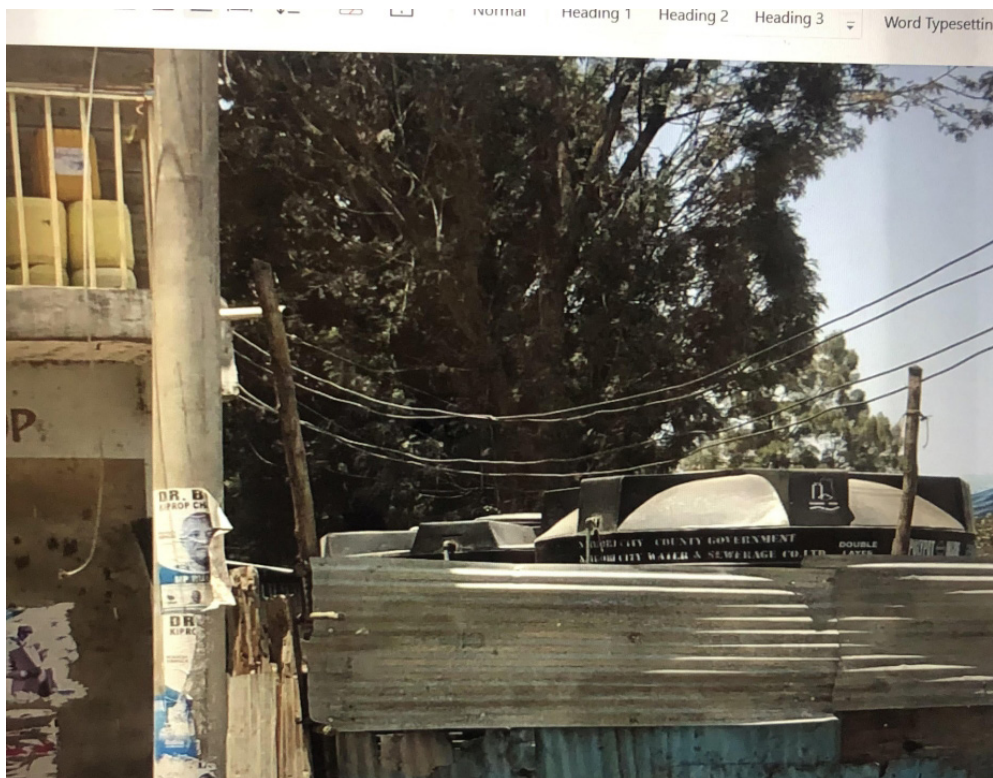


Figure 7: A Water Tank in a kiosk

Source: Researcher 2022



Figure 8: Scavenging at A Dumpsite

Source: Researcher 2022

the average the population per hut is eight persons for a small unit.

Informality in design and structure continue to define the single-rooms made of iron sheets, wood and mud in some areas. These shacks of tin and metals are home to many in the Valley. Uniformly the units are small, sometimes 3m by 3m squares, are of low height while uncomfortable to live in. The tin materials make the room temperatures too high during the day and too cold at night. Congestion is characteristic of the dwelling units and it becomes incomprehensible how families live but the reality on the ground is that these are homes to many in the valley. International aid channeled through the Catholic Church

in the 1990s was turned away and rejected under the guise that the owners of the land could not pay economic rents for the donors to recover the money sent in the rehabilitation of Mathare North. Instead the owners of the land alleged that their own shacks were similar to those put up by the Church and were occupied almost for free yet to recoup the money expended the Church was charging almost an economic rent which the residents could not accept. free of charge that the Church had built for them. The rooms are small in size and families live in congestion. On average a household size of 4-8 people living in a single room. Basket-woven mats and sheets are used to subdivide the room into compartments for functions such as sitting,

sleeping and cooking. This creates separate sleeping spaces for parents and children. This is grossly inadequate spacing compromises quality of air for the members while lack privacy for adults members cannot be questioned. In convergence with this my field observation was that poverty pushes these people to live in an unsanitary environment, whereby 60% of the residents use flying toilets. Human waste is strewn all over the place polluting the air as well as the river, which also serves as a source of water for domestic use. This further poses health challenges which are beyond the scope of this article. Open sewer and poor drainage is a common site in the villages as shown in Figure 9.

Due to illegal activities in most of the informal settlements, such as, illegal connections, particularly of water and electricity. There is some unwritten agreement between members of making the settlements exclusive areas where outsiders, irrespective of their intention and mission are not allowed. In Figure 10 take note of the dangerously low hanging electricity power lines.

The way the settlements are closely knit in terms of close alleys and lack of driveways or pathways, outsiders cannot weave their way through the settlements. Vigilante groups are gatekeepers who are on surveillance to keep off outsiders who are looked at suspiciously as informers, people on espionage to report on illegal water piping and electricity connections and are therefore unwelcome. This illegal unplanned enclosure of dwellings acts against the same vulnerable communities, in that in case of a fire outbreak, quite common in the same areas, the fire-brigade and other well-wishers on emergency rescue and evacuation mission are barely able to penetrate the settlements to save enough lives, especially those of helpless children and property.

Mathare Valley is located in a neighbourhood of abundance. The Kenya School of Monetary Studies and DeLa Rue, where Kenyan money is minted, The National Youth Service Engineering Unit (NYS), The Mathari Teaching and Referral Hospital, Moi Airbase, and the National Police Service-Traffic Headquarters among other high end institutions surround the Mathare Valley. Residents of the Valley can easily connect to the prestigious Thika Superhighway which has opened more income generating opportunities. In Figure 11 is a tarmac road which connects to the superhighway, gateway to the resource rich Central Kenya highland.

To the left in Figure 11 the stone-built two storey buildings belonging to the NYS Engineering unit while on the right the corrugated-ironsheet story-buildings are houses for the residents in Mathare North, which in its self is a physical hazards among the many vulnerabilities that define daily lives for the urban poor in the Valley yet every five years government after government continue to make promises on affordable housing for the poor in Nairobi.

In 2014 the Jubilee government like all previous regimes embarked on a rhetoric project of its affordable Housing Programme (AHP) under the much touted big four agenda. The aim was to provide 500,000 houses annually to meet the need. Yet the AHP did not provide even 700 units, which was way below the demand. This has seen many people homeless in the city, pavements are homes to many and under the bridges one finds many street families converting them to homes at night. The struggle between the city *askaris* and the vagrants, so to speak continue pretty much as they did in the 1930s. The city has not changed much in terms of adequacy in house provisioning. As a consequence the Mathare Valley settlement is home to over 800, 000, living in unsanitary shacks and



Figure 9: Drainage in the Valley

Source: Researcher 2022

Figure 10: Electricity Wire Connections

Source: Researcher 2022





Figure 11: The Valley Poverty in Proximity of Monetary Institutions

Source: Researcher 2022

shanties, devoid of basic rights guaranteed in the Constitution. The residents remain resilient surviving against odds of vagrancy acts, city council authorities harassment, bulldozing and fires. To date structures are put up as soon as they are destroyed, reflective of the inadequacy in housing for the urban poor and that municipal authorities have not paid attention to this need. The 100-years of existence, hide and seek, evictions, acts of arson, no upgrading and a rising urban population.

## Conclusion

The objective of this article was to tell the resilient story of the Mathare Valley, a story of transformation of the mud and wattle city to the stone and iron sheet tenements, shacks and shanties, depicting resilience and agency to fight homelessness created by default by the municipal authorities and successive government regimes. Modern and traditional structures co-exist in the valley today. The racial discrimination that was initiated as at the start of Nairobi has seen it grow into what it is today, a city of contrasts. Colonial policies of lack of provision for housing for the poor, de-

liberate effort to deny social amenities to Nairobi subalterns bred the 'self-help' the city of Mathare Valley. Through African agency, particularly that of women, who by use of indigenous alcohol brewing and prostitution made Mathare Valley Settlement came to be before the 1950s. The municipal council of Nairobi continued a policy of negligence to the perceived redundant natives, who to date are perceived as a haven for, filth, disease and crime. The story of housing in Mathare Valley is one of hybridity. Self-help efforts by the residents of Mathare were complemented by assistance from the government and those of the NCCK and World Bank and the international aid through the, Catholic Church. Having been founded on crime, prostitution and illegal brews that character and image, Mathare has not shed off that image. Today the mention of Mathare triggers the imagery of labyrinth streets, shacks, filth, raw sewerage, multiple vulnerabilities, violence, crime and absence of municipal services and government. The urban poor constitute close to half the population of Nairobi, therefore cannot be wished away whatsoever having carved out a space for themselves however precarious. The problems of Mathare are man-made by the political class, who grab land to collect economic rents from the poor, deny them social services yet continue to lump heaps of promises of better lives during campaigns and wish to retain the congestion in the Valley, as they the high density population holds an asset for the political class giving it leverage. After elections the city fathers and others the residents are abandoned in their want or served with token municipal services until the next election cycle after five years. There is need to reconsider urban housing in Mathare, upgrade in order to resolve some of the problems of disease burden and escalating crime rate. Mathare cannot be wished away but has to be integrated in the Nairobi City Master Plan, within

the paradigm of sustainable development for all as championed by UN the poor of Mathare ought to catered for in the Mater Plan of Nairobi futures.

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