

Rough notes on an informal settlement in Nairobi and some connections between this conference and the research project

Ben Crow

My research in this area grew out of a concern for access to household water. In the past, I have undertaken research on river development in South Asia, markets for rice and finance in the countryside of Bangladesh, and on global inequality. My concern with household water was motivated in part by interest in the connections between the 'private' sphere of the household and domestic work, and the 'public' sphere of economy and government. What has become plain as I have studied household water is that there are pivotal social dimensions to water use and that there is much to learn about connections between access to water and sanitation and unpaid domestic work in households.

So, I have spent time studying how women get access to water in the two settlements, the routes they take to water sources, how the time and cost of this work constrain other opportunities. Then, in parallel, I have been studying the iterative social, economic and political processes behind the rise and fall of promising initiatives for improved access to household water. I have been studying these processes mostly in two informal settlements, Kibera in Nairobi and Nyalenda in Kisumu, Kenya.

Kibera - rough notes

Kibera in Nairobi is an iconic settlement frequently termed Africa's largest slum (census results suggest it is not), the focus of attention of international agencies, foreign aid agencies and research. Recently, it has become the object of a growing business in 'slum tours' for foreigners.

As much as 60% of the population of Nairobi is thought to live in informal settlements. So, much of the lower working class lives there. Large residential estates, with somewhat better services, have been established for those with more formal employment in industry, commerce and government. Kibera is a large, long established informal settlement. It started as an area of forested land given in the early C20th to demobilized soldiers of Nubian ethnicity as recompense for their service in the British colonial army. Then, other groups came to settle in this area and the city of Nairobi rapidly grew to surround Kibera. There are some 13 villages, largely delineated by ethnicity. Some 80% of population are tenants paying rent to 'structure owners' some of whom are descendants of the Nubian. Over time, regional and district officials have gained control over some areas.

Decades of commercialization of water, electricity and other services has arisen because the settlement has been treated as marginal by local government and government agencies. In part this resulted from a policy of demolition of informal settlements. Even after the gradual decline of that expectation, Kibera's many ethnic villages have remained a low priority for city agencies and national government. Government services are limited or non-existent. Informal markets and community organization have established limited services for water, shelter, refuse collection and in some places sanitation.

The threat of demolition and displacement in Kibera comes from slum upgrading. A major thrust of Kenyan government slum upgrading plans involves 'decanting', demolition and building. Households are 'decanted' into temporary housing while multi-story apartment buildings are constructed. The plan is for these households to move into these apartments. Households that have been moved are given permits for future apartments. The cost of renting new apartments, however, is often too great for those households to consider. As a result, there is a tendency for middle class households to purchase the permit for the new apartment as a way to gain house ownership. Then, those households whose homes have been demolished seek housing in some other part of Kibera or in another settlement. The whole process takes years with opposition from land owners and others leading to legal challenge.

Housing consists mostly of 3m x 3m informal houses with tin roofs in which households of 5 to 8 people live. Water is available from taps with unregistered connections to large city pipes, operated by water vendors. Pipes for these enterprises are installed by structure-owners who employ local people to sell water. This water is expensive compared to those having registered connections to public pipes. Sanitation is through a small number of pit latrines organized by community groups and NGOs.

Livelihoods for men include skilled and unskilled labor in offices, industry and residences of the middle class in nearby estates, but also small scale trading on pavements. Many women are employed in domestic work in those homes, but small trading and production by women is common. These include sale of vegetables brought at larger markets, production of snacks for sale at the roadside, small salons for hairdressing and home-based clothes making.

Rough answers to some of the questions

1. Are there ways in which community based organizations and NGOs are representing and supporting the claims and negotiations of the urban poor with employers, city agencies and others?

There is a diverse range of community based organizations (CBOs) focusing on Kibera. Many operate with funding from international NGOs and even by UN agencies. Of these, a significant number focus on improvements in access to household water and sanitation. These are seen to be a high priority by international NGOs and there are surveys suggesting that such improvements are also widely-supported development priorities of communities. International interest and funding of such NGOs, often working on development projects, may overshadow the existence of a smaller number of CBOs working on housing and land rights, and legal initiatives to secure rights. Some CBO initiatives constitute social innovations in service provision and employment. Some CBOs are independent of government. Many work in some form of collaboration with government agencies.

2. Are national and municipal agencies attempting to upgrade the living conditions of the urban poor? Are those agencies responsive to concerns of residents? What is happening as a result of such action?

As noted above, both government agencies and, with a different approach, multilateral agencies like the World Bank support slum upgrading. Attempts are made to engage residents but they appear ineffective and often refracted by divisions of ethnicity and power in 'the community.'

3. Is there action focused on women's domestic work, and the risks and indignities that women face?

In Kibera, as in many informal settlements, household or domestic work mostly by women has rarely been the subject of collective action.

[A brief note on the larger research project.](#)

The research project that this conference will shape has been driven significantly by the idea that new opportunities are opened, particularly for women and girls, when there is a shift from what we call abject access to water and sanitation, such as that in Kibera, to greatly enhanced access. Abject access to water and sanitation is undignified, time-consuming, expensive and risky. It appears to make divisions of class and gender subordination and to constrain diverse opportunities. Enhanced access has nearby taps with sufficient water for a range of household activities and private, secure access to sanitation. Gaining access to urban services in the home reduces the time and indignity of access and enables a diverse range of opportunities including improved child and home care, greater leisure, education and opportunities for small home-based enterprise.

What the conference does is to stand back from that idea to investigate the larger context of entangled urbanization. This phrase aggregates the many and diverse interactions and processes through which poor households engage employers, landlords, markets and state agents in search of livelihoods, housing, healthcare and services, including water and sanitation.

The work plan and agenda of the conference seeks to illuminate how changes in household capabilities, in the four cities we are studying, may be situated in and part of the diverse forms of action through which the urban poor seek to survive and even advance their lives and livelihoods. The research project proposes research methods to examine changes in household capabilities in relation to the different entanglements of households with livelihoods, securing shelter and interactions with government agencies. We anticipate that the discussions of this conference will, on the one hand, lead to possibilities for collaboration and publication and, on the other, help illuminate the circumstances and contexts through which change can take place.