

TICKING TIME-BOMBS: LOW-INCOME SETTLEMENTS

Rasna Warah

Thirteen members of a hired eviction squad were battered to death by the residents of a low-income housing estate in a bloody rent dispute between tenants and a landlord in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi. The residents, dissatisfied with the charges, wanted the landlord to reduce the rent and had stopped paying rent for two months to force the issue. The landlord responded by hiring a gang of 100 youngsters to forcibly evict them. Instead of negotiating and without prior warning, the landlord sent an eviction squad. Tenants and residents of the surrounding slum decided to fight back and started to attack the evictors. After the gruesome killings, the residents broke into song dance as the police loaded the corpses onto a truck. The incident prompted Nairobi's provincial chief to ask: 'Why have Kenyans lost value for human life?' "

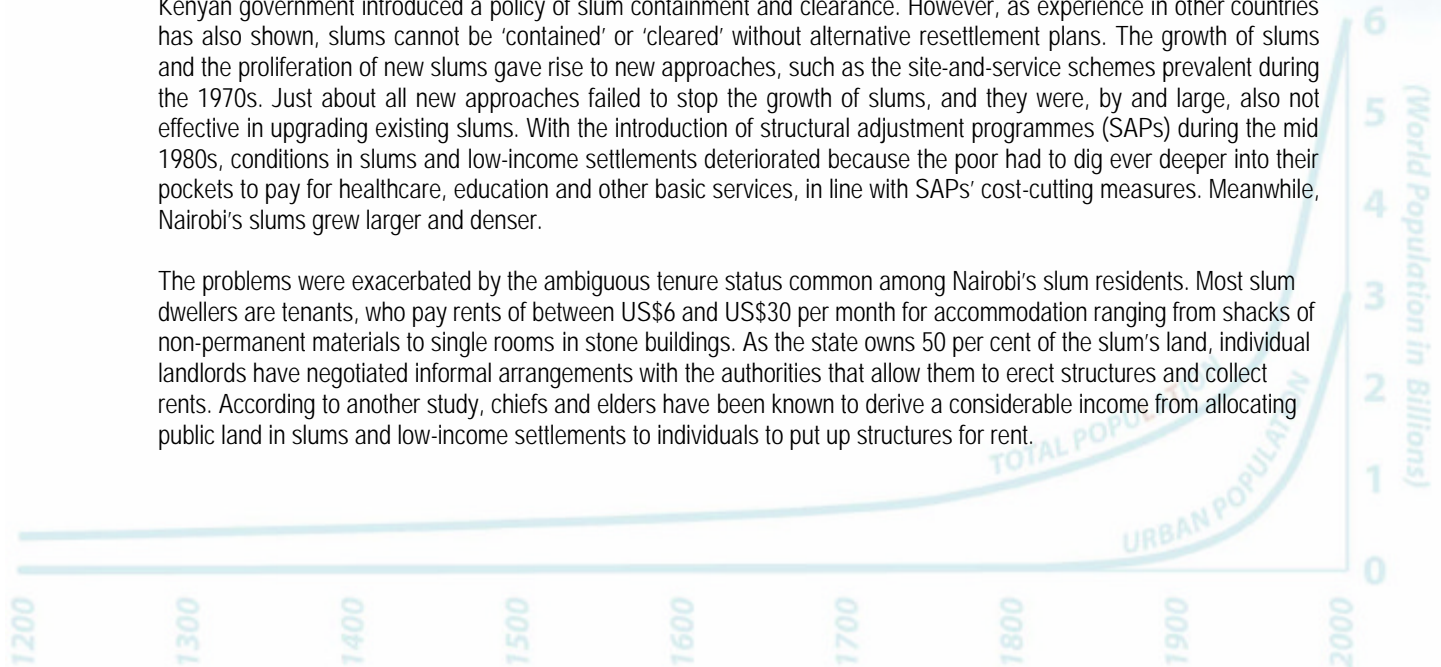
Was this mayhem in Mathare North, a low income settlement bordering one of the poorest slums, in June 2003 a sign of things to come? It was the kind of urban warfare that has been frequently foretold: that future conflicts would be urban conflicts and largely undeclared, pitting marginalized and privileged communities within the same city against each other.

So, what happened in Mathare North? The answer is simple. Violent forced evictions are often carried out with intimidation and terror tactics. In some cases, evictors physically harass or rape women and girls to break resistance prior to eviction, and it is not unusual for women and girls to be targeted during and before eviction. Evictions also often take place in the middle of the day, it is almost assured that most of the men will be away at work. The evictors take it out on women who resist with violence, beating, rape, torture and even murder. Moreover, families rendered homeless by an eviction are vulnerable to violence. Breakdown of the family is often a result of stress incurred from eviction and tends to further abuse.

Nairobi hosts some of the most densely populated, unsanitary and insecure slums of the world. Population densities as high as 1200 people per hectare are not uncommon, as are scant basic services – such as areas where 400 people share a single public toilet. An astonishing 60 per cent of Nairobi's entire population lives in such slum conditions.

It is not as if the government is unaware of the situation in slums and low-income settlements. At independence, the Kenyan government introduced a policy of slum containment and clearance. However, as experience in other countries has also shown, slums cannot be 'contained' or 'cleared' without alternative resettlement plans. The growth of slums and the proliferation of new slums gave rise to new approaches, such as the site-and-service schemes prevalent during the 1970s. Just about all new approaches failed to stop the growth of slums, and they were, by and large, also not effective in upgrading existing slums. With the introduction of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) during the mid 1980s, conditions in slums and low-income settlements deteriorated because the poor had to dig ever deeper into their pockets to pay for healthcare, education and other basic services, in line with SAPs' cost-cutting measures. Meanwhile, Nairobi's slums grew larger and denser.

The problems were exacerbated by the ambiguous tenure status common among Nairobi's slum residents. Most slum dwellers are tenants, who pay rents of between US\$6 and US\$30 per month for accommodation ranging from shacks of non-permanent materials to single rooms in stone buildings. As the state owns 50 per cent of the slum's land, individual landlords have negotiated informal arrangements with the authorities that allow them to erect structures and collect rents. According to another study, chiefs and elders have been known to derive a considerable income from allocating public land in slums and low-income settlements to individuals to put up structures for rent.



Structure owners are under no obligation to maintain the premises or provide any basic services. Rents are determined arbitrarily and evictions can occur at the whim of the structure owner. The dilemma facing those involved in improving slum conditions is how to reconcile the interests of all parties. Would slum upgrading mean that tenants have to pay more? Would and should city authorities charge for basic services? Who would bear the cost – the beneficiary, the landlord, the municipality or the state?

Meanwhile, the gap between the rich and poor within the city grows still wider. Most of the 134 slum settlements in the city border affluent residential areas, where the price of a house can range from US\$100,000 to \$500,000. This is a city where it is not uncommon to find palatial homes located a few yards from shacks.

Some believe that slum-improvement schemes are self-defeating as slums are not only inevitable, but also because they are considered a mark of 'success' of a city. Slums provide a large proportion of the low-wage labour force that makes cities work. Without slum dwellers, many urban based industries, factories, shops and even homes would come to an abrupt halt. Slums provide cheap accommodation for those who cannot afford to spend more on housing and related services. Newly arriving migrants to cities move into slums as these constitute the only affordable accommodation. Insisting on a city without slums, especially when no alternative housing has been developed, means generating more financial and other hardships for the very group who is essential to urban functioning.

Alternative, improved housing and services are expensive – too expensive for countries such as Kenya that already face many urban priorities with limited budgets. Slum upgrading is also fraught with complexities. Effective slum upgrading needs, amongst other things, organized dweller movements to enable negotiated rents and to secure improved access to services. In some cities, such as Mumbai, India, slum dwellers are organized as part of a national federation that speaks for them and that collectively negotiates planning, construction and maintenance issues. Associations are also important for slum dwellers' social and psychological well-being.

This is already happening in Kenya, where slum dwellers are organizing themselves into federations that seek to secure better housing and land rights for slum dwellers. As a result, evictions and arson attacks on slum settlements are becoming less common. But poor communications between slum dwellers and the authorities have led to mounting tension within slums. According to Odindo Opiata, a lawyer with Kituo Cha Sheria, a legal aid non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Nairobi, the lack of information flow between the authorities and slum dwellers threatens to polarize residents even further and to result in more disputes in Kenya's major cities.

Slum life already has a profoundly destabilizing effect on families, often leading to a vicious circle of broken homes, crime and prostitution. Growing polarization and exclusion can further contribute to this destabilization, making slums a potential source of national, regional and global insecurity. Evidence around the world has shown that cities which are unable to bridge income inequalities and manage social integration are likely to be more violent and insecure than those which are less polarized.

Participatory, pro-poor policies addressing informal settlement issues can go a long way in alleviating current conflicts. At the macro level, however, governments need to implement economic policies that reduce urban income disparities.

Some of the most respected professionals in developing countries started their lives in slums and low-income settlements. Kenya is no different. Young teachers, lawyers or journalists are often forced to rent a room in a low-income area, probably sharing bathrooms with several people and dreaming of the day when they can own their home – an aspiration that is as distant as access to the mortgages that are beyond the reach of most people. But slums and low-income settlements are a function of urban poverty, failing economic and urban management and, all too frequently, lack of political will. No slum improvement scheme can be successful without a strong commitment on the part of national and local governments to fight urban poverty. For this, they need to start making effective inroads into failing systems of housing markets, credit provision and wealth distribution.

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