Youth mobilities and belonging in and out of a Kenyan urban ‘hood’

By Edward Kahuthia Murimi & Tatiana Adeline Thieme

Abstract
This piece explores the empirical context of Mlango Kubwa, a low-income neighbourhood in Nairobi, Kenya, to reflect on the wider relevance across African cities of inter-generational dynamics and dialogue amongst youth born and raised ‘in the hood’. Contributing to the academic and policy interest in youth-led community development and the future of work for African youth, we focus in particular on the tensions and solidarities between youth who leave the neighbourhood (the leavers) and those who stay (stayers). We draw together our perspectives (as a leaver and an ethnographer), to write about the vital roles, synergies and tensions between the leavers and stayers, in shaping urban life in neighbourhoods that are under-resourced but a repository of local knowledge, talent, and untold stories. This piece will interest urban practitioners seeking to harness the skills and resourcefulness of at-risk youth groups comprising the marginalised majority of residents in African cities, who continue to fill (and capitalise on) service delivery and governance gaps. Ultimately, we emphasise the importance of allyship, and paying attention to what is there and how it works, rather than criminalising youth and dwelling on what is absent or needs fixing.

Key words: Nairobi, youth, the hood, leavers and stayers, hustling.
As in many other African cities that have experienced rapid urbanisation, over 60% of Nairobi’s residents live in various densely populated pockets on the periphery of the Central Business District (Huchzermeyer 2011; Myers 2011). These popular neighbourhoods reflect the palimpsests of 64 years of 20th century extractive settler colonialism (Sarr 2019), and almost 60 years of post-colonial uneven urban development. They have thus been under-served, exploited or marginalised by the colonial and post-colonial state (Githiora 2018), and let down or duped by the false promises of the international development industry (Escobar 1995).

As a result, these neighbourhoods have at different moments elicited state neglect and under-investment, media dramatisation and stigma, local fear of authorities, and patchwork development intervention, but also a long history of community-led activism and self-provisioning (Hake 1977). Much of the material infrastructure is visibly in a state of disrepair, and most of the human labour, classified as the informal or ‘jua kali’ economy, lies outside wage employment (Hart 2009; King 1996). The diverse forms of work including vegetable hawkers, shoe-shiners, repair technicians, hairdressers, hand-cart pullers, tea stall vendors, kiosk retailers, water vendors, and laundry service providers to mention a few, are at once small-scale, under-resourced, and physically arduous, but also resilient, self-regulated, and entangled in webs of mutual aid and reciprocity (Kinyanjui 2019). Many of these Nairobi neighbourhoods have been written about, studied, and filmed, in ways that often portray living conditions as ‘uninhabitable’ (Simone and Pieterse 2016:60). And yet, for those who live, work, play, and spend time in these neighbourhoods, the street, the rooftop, the corner tea stall, the water point, and the stoop still provide vital places of belonging (hooks 2008). This is especially the case for youth, who are the marginalised majority. To most Nairobians, their neighbourhoods are ‘informal settlements’ or ‘slums’, but to youth who were born and raised there, this is the mtaa, or the hood.

The hood we focus on in this piece is Mlango Kubwa, which literally means ‘the big door’ in Swahili. It is situated in one of Nairobi’s largest and oldest informal settlements known as Mathare Valley (Hake 1977; UN-Habitat 2015). For youth caught in a state of ‘waithood’, unable to reach traditional markers of adulthood as they contend with structural barriers to formal education and employment (Honwana 2012) and the pains of corruption (Murimi 2018), Mlango Kubwa has provided economic opportunities through youth-led waste management services, water vending and electricity connection, and street-oriented peer-to-peer learning (Thieme 2013). For youth who call this place home, Mlango Kubwa is figuratively a revolving door for those who opt to leave but regularly come back (the leavers) and those who stay (the stayers). For both cohorts, Mlango Kubwa is a repository of resources and social ties rather than a ‘poverty trap’1. The hood is the place where ‘street dreams’ (Weiss 2009) and everyday struggles, hustles, and solidarities converge (Atieno-Odhiambo 1995; Thieme 2017), a place where childhood friendship groups build solidarities and a sense of place (hooks 2008).

In the late 1990s, the municipality was unable to keep up with the growing demand for basic service provision across the city. In the ‘slum’ areas, garbage was piling up, and eventually residents were living around heaps of uncollected household waste accumulating in neglected alleyways and at the interstices within the neighbourhood. At the same time, the rates of under-employment amongst youth were rising, and with many youth unable to finish secondary school for various extenuating circumstances, the prospects of finding paid work were increasingly tenuous. Youth, who had formed friendship-based collectives (known as youth groups) at first to play football, started to self-organise
and identify ways to make work outside established economies (what they called ‘hustling’) if jobs 
could not be found (Thieme 2017). It was in Mlango Kubwa that a group of youth pioneered what 
eventually became a city-wide, neighbourhood-based, youth-led waste management service.

It started with a group of about 30 youth, who went by their popular name of Pequeninos/Peque, but 
formally registered as a CBO known as Mathare Environment Conservation Youth Group² (MECYG). 
At a time when youth were being stigmatised as ‘idle’ and ‘unemployed’, there was gall and irony in 
their vision to turn ‘trash into cash’ and compel local households to pay for the collection service 
in exchange for a cleaner neighbourhood. The group started mapping Mlango Kubwa and created 
a garbage collection cartography to divide the labour and control over certain plots. At first their 
services included weekly waste collection, removal and disposal, but within a few years it became 
clear that adding value to the business would involve creating additional services. They eventually 
identified the value of recovering, reselling, and recycling different materials of the collected waste, 
plastic being the most lucrative to sell to recycling companies in the industrial area.
The other core income-generation activity for the group was a pay-to-watch service, held in a social hall built on a reclaimed piece of land within the community, where residents of Mlango Kubwa would assemble together and pay to watch live European football league matches. After more than two decades of serving the community in various ways (from garbage collection to community outreach programmes for street families, and keeping an ‘eye’ on the street), Pequeninos has continued to operate as a local football club in a football league organised by the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSIA). The group’s model of generating income by serving the community and combined sporting activities was replicated by other youth groups in the larger Mathare area. These youth organisations and their activities collectively contributed to keeping Mathare relatively clean and safe by dissuading hundreds of youth from resorting to opportunistic crime for survival.

Today, the dynamics of this ‘self-help’ city (Hake 1977) within the neoliberal city of Nairobi are changing. In Mlango Kubwa and in the wider Mathare, a significant number of youth (now middle-aged adults) who founded organisations such as Pequeninos are still holding onto their initial and now well-established neighbourhood businesses, though their work would be classified as ‘non-standard’ employment (ILO 2018). Their livelihoods and investments depend on these homegrown hustles. Over the years, however, tensions have emerged between these (now older) pioneers of homegrown services, and the younger generation who are keen to tap into established ‘youth-led’ economies. The stayers are grappling with an intergenerational tension and reckoning, as a new cohort of young adults demand a share of the income-earning opportunities, if not a total takeover. They are challenging the original mapping of the community that allocated sections of the neighbourhood to the founders, trying to make a claim to this territorial entrepreneurial zoning. In the last five years, the tension between the stayers and these younger youth has been palpable and often on the verge of violent.

The leavers, who grew up with the stayers and were part of the founding youth organisations, have left the hood mainly thanks to higher education, professional sports and formal employment in Kenya or in the Gulf countries. Yet, they maintain a deep connection to the hood and keep returning, pulled back by strong family and friendship ties, the obligation to provide, and the feeling of home. Some have developed a personal brand that leverages both their local street credibility in the hood and external connections, which has helped them win political seats within Mathare or campaign for political seats within Mathare in the forthcoming general elections in Kenya. Both stayers and leavers who co-founded local CBOs have at different points consulted with INGOs and UN Agencies ‘on behalf of urban poor youth’.

For members of Pequeninos, Mlango Kubwa has thus become an economic and social melting pot for the stayers and leavers who are deeply connected to this hood. For both groups, Mlango Kubwa is a repository of social capital, belonging, and allegiances, but it is also an increasingly contested terrain contending with diverse ‘youth’ imaginaries. This raises questions about the future of peaceful coexistence between different peer groups who make claims to youth-led economies, and who are currently navigating the need to find renewed forms of distribution and intergenerational solidarity, in order to protect but also extend livelihood opportunities to new entrants into the local labour market, while continuing to provide vital basic services to residents who have come to depend on them. It is likely that the stayers holding onto the established community-based hustles will, sooner or later, be pressured to relinquish their hold of (or at least share) the garbage collection territories to the new
In this final section, we set out five points for consideration and deliberation, which we hope are applicable to popular neighbourhoods in other African cities. From our combined vantage points, as a leaver who was born and raised in Mlango Kubwa and keeps going back, and as an ethnographer who has come in and out since 2009, we do not wish to be prescriptive, but simply offer an empirically informed provocation.

First, it seems clear to us, based on lived experience and ethnographic fieldwork, that youth groups in themselves are not only business collectives, but also vital networks of support, mentoring, and knowledge sharing. Conventional (capitalist) economies tend to reward individual successes and gains, and yet as Mary Kinyanjui (2019) points out in her work on the Utu-Buntu business model, a cornerstone of informal economies in Kenya has always been mutuality and reciprocity – in other words collective investments that build shared resources that can benefit the many. What then are
the levers for leavers to invest in their hoods or campaign meaningfully on their behalf without being accused of ‘selling out’ or going about it alone? Also, though youth may individually be classified as ‘under-employed’ and ‘high school dropouts’, how might the aggregate skill-set of youth groups, as a collective of diverse service providers, be rendered more visible and employable beyond the hood? Access to information and particularly awareness of opportunities meant for youth and how to access these is pivotal. For example, individual youth as well as middle-aged adults upon exiting youth-led activities and organisations such as Pequeninos in popular neighbourhoods such as Mlango Kubwa would be eligible for the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) programme which in principle promises to have women, youth and PWDs access 30% of government procurement opportunities. However, applying for this programme requires a certain confidence and bureaucratic literacy that youth from the hood don’t necessarily have.

Second, it is important that different aspirations between generations of youth be recognised. While residential waste management was important and innovative for the youth of the early 2000s, what matters to those of the 2020s? What local skills and resources can be harnessed for these younger youth, who are super-connected to digital platforms and see themselves as globalised cosmopolitan ‘ghetto boyz’ and ‘ghetto gals’ with shared struggles and solidarities to other hoods (Ntarangwi 2009; Weiss 2009)? What has time done in terms of how they see the world? Here, capacity building focused on diverse forms of entrepreneurship and skills is essential for the sustainable expansion of existing hustles in neighbourhoods like Mlango Kubwa, while enabling access to programmes such as the AGPO. At the same time, local governments should not restrict growth of existing and new hustles in the community with suffocating regulations that seek to either mainstream or over-police the informality of these hustles. Non-governmental actors could possibly fill the capacity gaps that hinder access and growth for youth, their organisations and their hustles.

Third, we propose that entrepreneurship networking among youth organisations such as Pequeninos with other youth organisations in the larger Mathare area holds great potential to improve returns from their hustles. For example, there is a long overdue opportunity to leverage economies of scale for youth groups across Mathare who provide similar services such as household waste collection, disposal and recycling. Together, they have stronger bargaining power in the market and can share costs and equipment. In turn, external actors and customers would more easily dare to invest in, and see the value of working with, hood-based economies. The alternative is a continued vicious circle of income streams and spending that stay within already low-income communities.

Fourth, the days of ‘NGO-isation’ (Choudry & Kapoor 2013) that accelerated from the early 1990s is transitioning, not least with the significant funding cuts of international development budgets (from countries like the UK for example). Youth are tired of being foot soldiers for slum touring one-off NGO projects. Homegrown community activist organisations in Mathare like Ghetto Foundation are building alliances with other allies, including action researchers, to develop alternative mechanisms for support, mentorship, and collaboration. These are local organisations that are experimenting with innovative and decolonial pedagogies and programmes of work outside mainstream educational and development paradigms. There have also been collaborations between social enterprises and local youth groups (Thieme 2015), as well as citizens mapping collectives collaborating with local activists to create counter-cartographies of ‘slum’ areas to mobilise for citizenship rights to better
infrastructure. Though these are isolated or relatively small-scale examples, these shed light onto the constellation of experimental and alternative schemas for collective urban living and working.

Lastly, the leavers – with their qualifications and exposure to diverse sectors - have an important role to play, given their access to and potential influence in the hood. They are best placed to be role models and provide coaching to younger youth and their middle-aged peers who have stayed in the hood. It is important to recognise that not all young people in neighbourhoods like Mlango Kubwa can or want to be entrepreneurs. The leavers, with the combined lived experience of juggling survival through community-based hustles and striving to acquire skills needed in the formal job market, are in the best position to guide the younger generation in bridging their aspirations and the expectations of the job market. Their regular visits should not only be to extract from the hood – socially, politically and economically—but also to give back to the space that was, and still is, their springboard.

In conclusion, we call for a deeper consideration of the intergenerational tensions, solidarities, and struggles to provide and re-distribute, that African cities face. We hope this might invite further dialogue on the need to pluralise what we mean by ‘youth’, whose stories are being heard, and whose urban futures are rendered (in)visible and (im)possible.

Endnotes:

1 See for example The 2014 Economist piece “Down and Out: Shantytowns may be more of a trap than economists thought”. Available online: https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2014/05/05/down-and-out

2 MECYG: https://mathareonestop.org/

3 Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) programme, https://agpo.go.ke/pages/about-agpo

4 Ghetto Foundation: https://www.ghettofoundationkenya.org/

5 Map Kibera: https://www.mapkibera.org/

6 Map Kibera: https://www.mapkibera.org/

7 Ghetto Foundation: https://www.ghettofoundationkenya.org/
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