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REPORTS

KIBERA..., MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME! RESEARCHING THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NAIROBI'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENT OF KIBERA¹

Lenka Smolinská

Abstract: The report presents findings from research conducted on a community development in the informal settlement of Kibera in Nairobi. The research was conducted as a base for my Master's Thesis in the year 2006 and focused on the community-based youth organizations. Apart from observing and describing their activities I recorded the emic perception of life in Kibera and views on poverty. I found out that the common outsiders' discourse and description of life in an impoverished settlement differs greatly from the view of its young adult inhabitants. Due to the youth's enthusiastic and indeed philosophical attitude to life I decided to focus on the positive aspects and reveal the wealth present in Kibera. The wealth, as I tried to show, rests in the young proactive population of Kibera who are striving to be recognized and respected.

Keywords: *Informal settlement, community development, youth organizations, Kenya, Kibera*

Hic sunt leones...

Am I going to do fieldwork in a desert or in the country's capital?

Before my departure to Nairobi, I tried to prepare myself well for the three-month stay in Nairobi, looking for information on the Internet and meeting people who went to Kenya or particularly to Kibera. Without exceptions, all the written materials I gathered and all the oral testimonies I heard were, to a greater or lesser extent, negative. To leave aside the possible quality of my

1 Informal settlements are low-income areas with semi-permanent structures built on private or government land and therefore, not officially recognized as part of the city. This official term is usually replaced by the more common word slum.

theoretical preparation, I started to have doubts about the very intention of doing fieldwork in Nairobi's informal settlements.

Another disappointment was my Internet research concerning the youth-led development in Kibera, about which I found almost no information. However, I knew that it existed thanks to the website of an organization, Kibera Community Youth Programme (KCYP)². This website gave me some idea and hope. Apart from this single website, the existence of youth groups in Kibera was hidden in silence.

Consequently, the fact that I actually found many youth-led community-based organizations³ on the spot was quite surprising. I also found that they were not supported and organized from outside. My instant decision was, therefore, to know their work and to communicate my findings in the thesis.

Furthermore, soon after my arrival in the field I started to see a discrepancy between common discourse on poverty and the actual situation in the particular context. The information I found so threatening when still at home appeared to be far too generalizing since it mentioned always, and only, the negative aspects of the life in slums - the dirty environment, and the incapacities of the inhabitants, making it almost impossible to imagine the presence of positive things. I felt this was an injustice towards all those people I met. Therefore I assumed a position operatively called "Show-the-positive approach", intending to reveal that under the dust and rust, under the so-called poverty line, many things can be found that are impressive in a positive way. This became the single most important task of my work. I hope that it will help to uproot some stereotypes about the inhabitants of slums, especially the youth of Kibera.

Through qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews and participatory observation, I focused on the research of the work of young people from Kibera as members of community-based organizations, but also as individuals with some personal motivations and dreams, and, indeed, as philosophers. I express my regrets on the fact that people, as individuals who try to realize their inner potential, are being ignored in the development literature and project design. The importance of personal development and discovery of an inner potential is being neglected at the expense of economic progress.

2 KCYP. www.kcyp.net.

3 Community-based organization, or CBO, is founded and coordinated by members of local community and is responsible for planning, managing, and implementing developmental change with little, if any, intervention from governments, or other external actors.

If I had interviewed only one of those youngsters I talked to, it would have been enough for me to say that one can find great potential in Kibera which deserves to be recognized.

Creating a myth of Kibera

The choice of Kibera as a field for my research was not deliberate. It is, however, a place where researchers often head to. On the one hand, it is a very good place for doing fieldwork and, on the other, it could appear to be unsuitable for the same reason.

Some claim that Kibera is the biggest slum in Africa, others deny it. It is, nevertheless, the most populated slum in East Africa spreading out in sight of the world's biggest development agencies with their headquarters placed right in the centre of all development endeavours, in the region's capital, Nairobi. Its name has become notorious in the 'world of poverty reduction strategies' offering its name for different, not always transparent intentions. The result is the exposure of Kibera to the presence of various NGOs and their staff from Western countries and to researchers hired to investigate the possibilities of implementing another project that will (this time at last) help the inhabitants to improve their situation. Although lots of work is being done to keep the semblance that everything is on the move the situation doesn't seem to be improving. Where is all the money that is being brought here flowing? Where are the results of in numerous studies being put into practise?

Kibera, indeed, is over-researched, which I came to find only after establishing some contacts there, therefore I decided to stay and add one more tick in the statistics. Most of the fieldwork, however, is based on collecting quantitative data. A team of researchers with hired assistants run around the place to reach as many people as possible in as little time as possible. What is the result of these studies? It is often a stereotypical picturing of the place that serves the development agencies to get more funds. This picture is usually based on "showing-the-worst-that-can-be-found" approach and it is thanks to this that the Dark Myth of Kibera (and other slum areas) was created.

Therefore, the number of agencies and the weariness of the inhabitants of the number of studies that have been conducted, Kibera could seem an unsuitable field for yet another study, however, it eventually proved to be a very good field for an investigation about community development. There are two things I can think of that all the organizations managed to bring and that helped local people to start their own development efforts. The first one is the fatigue factor that arises when foreign efforts fail to bring results; and the endless waiting for any visible improvement promised by these agents. The second one is

the know-how that brought to light the idea of different strategies for poverty alleviation and that keeps improving the effectiveness of their implementation through countless workshops on various issues.

In the end, I was happy that I hit upon the website of the KCYP that introduced me to Kibera which at first sight appealed to me.

Poverty is when... Stereotypical portraying and stigma

"People see rusty roofs and they think we have rusty heads."
Mohammed, Kamsheg⁴

After knowing local people and their efforts I perceived very well the groundlessness of all the generalizations I had read about the inhabitants of low-income areas. I blame this stereotypical discourse on poverty for creating biases and I will look closer at this problem in the following part of the article.

Among researchers and experts on poverty there exists nowadays a consensus on the multidimensional character of the concept. Therefore, poverty is no longer perceived as a mere lack of material assets, but as a complex sense of ill-being underpinned by psychological deprivation. This shift provided a bigger field for making descriptions (leading to judgements) of how poor people live, how they behave, and how they should behave.

The picture of poor people, and popular representations of poverty in general, has been mainly negative a fact which necessarily affects poor people's well-being. "*The higher layers,*" writes Øyen (2002: 1), "*claim the right to define what is good and bad behaviour, what is right and wrong in terms of social norms, and what is best for society at-large.*" Those who stand higher in the hierarchy tend to distance themselves from the lower layers, and therefore, are not likely to describe kindly those at the bottom. Such biased descriptions do not necessarily depict the truth. Thus, a stereotypical picture has been developed leaving no space for a more accurate and factual account of causes and manifestations of poverty.

Øyen calls this portraying a tale-telling tradition and thinks that the tale-telling phase in poverty research has not been overcome yet. "*In spite of recent developments and new accumulated knowledge, the understanding of poverty and the use of poverty research are still dominated by tale-telling*" (Ibid.: 2).

4 Kamsheg – Kambi Muru self-help group. One of the youth-groups I interviewed.

The literature on poverty-related issues seems to pursue a policy of stressing the ‘lackings’ of the poor, their incapacities and the stigma bound with poverty. “*Poor people often lack practical skills that would help them earn a livelihood. Their lack of ability to provide for their families and belong to society leads to low self-confidence and self-worth*” (Narayan et al. 2000B: 235).

Lacking, low, stigma, deviant, poor... Vulnerability, crime, poverty, apathy, poverty, lacking... Such testimonies serve the purpose of the studies that were designed to create a basis for the new poverty reduction strategies (and were described in the *World Development Report 2000/2001*) but do they serve the people they should serve?

Lack of acceptance by broader society is seen as one of major constraints of poverty in the series of papers called *Voices of the poor*.⁵ In *Crying out for change* Narayan et al. (2000b: 136) say that: “*The stigma of poverty, and the perception of deviant behaviour associated with it, is a recurring theme in discussions with poor people*”.

Denied the right to philosophize

Young people also have to face biases towards them. In some communities, as mentioned in the World Bank’s research in Kenya (2005: 41), the youth are seen as immature troublemakers, a fact which contributes to their exclusion. Discussions with youths revealed that they feel a lack of respect from the society that does not take them seriously and looks upon them as irresponsible and unproductive. The youths would welcome a forum that would give them a voice in community affairs.

Young people from low-income settlements are doubly stigmatized. Since general perception links poverty to crime and the proportion of young criminals is higher, they are feared by the outside world and often subject to police harassment.

Frank from KCYP also knows this feeling: “*Sometimes, you know, people when they see a guy from Kibera they just hide their cell phones, if they have it in the hand, just because they think that everyone from here is a thief.*”

5 *Voices of the Poor* is a multi-country research initiative undertaken to understand poverty from the perspectives of poor people and creating a basis for the *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking poverty*. The findings were published in three volumes: *Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Narayan et al 2000a), *Crying Out for Change* (Narayan et al 2000b), and *From Many Lands* (Narayan and Petesch 2002) that offers regional patterns and country case studies.

This stigma makes young people from Kibera shout: “*You can’t philosophize, you’re in Kibera!*”⁶ Although meant as a joke it carries an important message. Firstly, the slum Kibera is regarded by the rest of the society (how broad?) as a place where none is able or even supposed to philosophize⁷ and secondly, it tells us that people from Kibera actually *can* philosophize.

I kept asking myself: Why is it that the youth from low-income settlements cannot enjoy the respect of others? Why is it that poverty means the denial of dignity and the lack of self-esteem?⁸

Let’s replace pity with respect

“We live from hand to mouth, but we are not poor in minds.”
Robert, KCYP

Fortunately, the perceptions are not always single-sided. We saw that most of the literature concerning poverty “*stresses the lack of local capacity*” (Environment and Urbanization 2001: 5) but those working directly with people in the low-income areas have generally different perspectives than the academics, consultants or international agency staff. “*Those who work directly with low-income groups in urban areas, their community organizations and the local professionals with whom they interact (for instance, local doctors, nurses, teachers and staff of local NGOs) are constantly confronted with exceptional people, doing exceptional work with very few resources*” (Ibid.).

What I have learnt is that Kibera doesn’t need more heart-touching testimonies that are meant to attract compassionate donors. Kibera needs RECOGNITION and this can only be done through an approach focused on positive examples creating respect. But the environment of respect cannot be created by repeating the tales and stereotypes about the poor and their lives. Such stories are likely to bring only more pity and pity enables the rich to distance themselves from those they take mercy on. Pity is a feeling that makes

6 A phrase uttered by Fred, director of KCYP, to Kepha, a programme officer, while discussing some issue.

7 According to an on-line dictionary philozophizing means to 1) *speculate or theorize, usually in a superficial or imprecise manner*; 2) *think or reason as a philosopher* (<http://www.infoplease.com/dictionary/philosophize>). Similarly, according to thesaurus it is to “*reason philosophically*”, <http://www.infoplease.com/thesaurus/philosophize>. Is it not a basic capacity of a human’s brain to reason, think, speculate?

8 From the Human Development Report 1997 (UNDP 1997: 5), “*(Poverty) can also mean the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development – to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and the respect of others.*”

someone feel superior to the person he is taking pity on, it is an elitist approach that usually leads only to sentimentality without a real intention to help. It is a cheap illusion of how good we are (and we like to believe ourselves as such).

On the other hand, respect as perceived by myself, comes from recognition of one's value. And it is indeed easier to respect people by identifying similarities and positive efforts instead of differences and failures.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to introduce such concepts as respect to the poverty research as they *"do not lend themselves to measurement, are in practice not measured and so, for normal professionals, barely exist and rarely count"* (Chambers 1995: 191).

Thanks god that we have qualitative research!

Who says that we are poor?

I was given the opportunity to join in one discussion on poverty, held on March 3rd, 2006 in Kibera. The participants (consisting only from the youth of Kibera engaged in community-based development) were giving various ideas that altogether rejected the common views on poverty as unfair and, indeed, humiliating.

For example, Frank from the Kibera Community Youth Programme (KCYP) mentioned the relativity of the concept of poverty by saying: *"I think that nobody is poor. It is just the fact that you don't have something that he has. Poverty is just a state of mind - When you think you are poor. The point is, we try to picture things and set standards, like if he has these big shoes he is rich and if you can't afford shoes like him, you're poor. These are the standards set by people."*

Similarly, Leo adds: *"OK, people say that we in Kibera are poor, so then you just believe that you're poor and you're not working hard. So that being poor is a mental idea that makes poor of me because I believe I can't make it... because someone else tells you."*

Laura, an assistant director in the same youth group talked about the subjectivity of poverty: *"It depends on your feeling of comfort. You can feel bad while living in Lavington⁹ and feel good living in Kibera. Why should I want to live in Lavington? Everyone has its own perspective of life."*

Kepha, a 23-year-old boy, who likes philosophizing, recognizes all the constraints but sees a big challenge in them: *"Poverty is a very strict teacher because*

9 Lavington is a posh residential quarter in Nairobi.

it leaves you a mark that can never be erased. It develops your character in a way because you really, really struggle hard to live. It teaches you really strongly how to live, how to survive. And it is not a teacher that loves you, like the teachers that love their children. It is very, very angry, sometimes. Sometimes you sleep hungry. It punishes you temporarily but it builds you ever more. So I believe we are students in this class... People could learn from poverty if they saw it as a teacher and not a punisher, something that develops them as well. Those who are poor and live in Kibera should therefore learn from poverty and how to be students in this class ...”

Of course, the material aspect of poverty was also discussed during the meeting, the lack of basic needs, but according to Kepha, *“The most important food in man’s life is not just the physical food that you eat.”*

Leo concluded the discussion by a full-hearted phrase: *“I am poor only when I am dead!”*

Working for the community

“Anyway, even if you develop personally, you’re still developing the community.”
Kepha, KCYP

The youth from Kibera have the strongest motivation to work for the development of the community because they are part of it. The welfare of the community is thus connected to their own. Just as Kepha from KCYP remarked above.

The World Bank (2005: 43) states that *“Despite the difficulties that they present, the slums can also be a source of protection for youths. Young people who live in slum areas report feeling part of a community and a sense of connectedness and belonging that does not exist in more affluent areas of the city.”*

There is not enough space here to describe the work of youth groups, ranging from leisure activities like football, to educational theatre, school outreaches, and environmental clean-ups. The education focuses on creating awareness about HIV/AIDS, drugs, gender-based violence etc.

Some activities are designed for income-generation because the groups are rarely supported materially from outside. At best, they are offered workshops by NGOs present in Nairobi, or given some financial help from casual well-wishers. The income-generating activities, or IGAs, include garbage collection, selling separated trash for recycling, music and dance performances, and various public services.

The organizations also play an important role in supporting young talents, helping to realize their potential. People who want to become actors, singers or playwrights are given a chance to show their works to their fellow members and the community and through their organization, sometimes, they can find also material support. *“Here in KCYP, we have opportunities for meeting many people that you interact with and they might inspire you. In one way I am empowered because I will be able to think beyond the box. I can now make an independent choice and have a vision about my own life”* Fred, director.

Information as an asset

“There is no development that can happen without information.”

Fred, KCYP

A big contribution of the youth groups is that they provide community with information. Fred continues: *“...Information dictates how much you move the development. So that is our contribution – giving the community information that it needs. And also giving skills to young people who are developing themselves but at the same time helping the community.”*

Much of the information is targeted at the awareness creation about problematic issues such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, drugs and other present-day problems.

Fred continues to talk about KCYP's contribution to the development of the community: *“Most of our projects have been focused on community service. We've been very instrumental in creating HIV/AIDS sensitisations, we use theatre, we do community outreaches,”* and Kepha further explains: *“We've been trying to concentrate on gaining knowledge and dispatching this knowledge to the community, perhaps in a different way – because most people here don't understand English, so we get the knowledge in English, like a channel from experts. Then we repackage it, in form of drama, in form of poetry, in form of music and then we take it to the community, in a very casual way.”*

Together with disseminating knowledge about HIV/AIDS, the organizations also concentrate on the reduction of the stigma that is perceived to go hand in hand with the disease. *“...people with HIV come and share and open up. Because we sensitize them they know each and every aspect of the thing and the stigma is being reduced. That's an impact that we've made. By understanding it we have reduced the stigma... So they do not end up just saying: ‘Oh, that one has HIV, that is stigma’”* (Haron and Pape, CVDRII¹⁰).

10 CVDRII stands for Centre for viable development, research, innovation and intervention.

I asked about the importance of youth groups also Abzed Osman from Duduba Youth Group and he answered that the groups are “*very important because our community must know more about HIV/AIDS. We educate them through seminars, awareness, outreaches, theatre... At least community members gain a little bit of education from youth groups. We know some facts about AIDS and myths about AIDS. So we take the myths and put them into facts.*”

Kathy from KCYP also wants the community to get information, but she says that “*getting the information is not enough. When they apply the information, that is satisfaction. So I see, if I continue doing this for example for five years, the community is going to develop. I hope we’re going to reach as many people as possible. But we can’t reach all of them.*”

Promotion of positive peer influence

Development can happen through the influence young people render on their peers. Youth organizations provide “*a forum in which they (youngsters) can take on positive social roles and which does not tempt them to engage in risky behaviour. The organizations also give young people a sense of belonging and are a source of positive interaction among them*” (World Bank 2005: 47). Moreover, those who gain are not only the beneficiaries of the programmes but also the peer educators themselves. If they give a positive example, through words and actions, it has an equal protective power for them. “*There is ample evidence that when young people participate as peer youth educators, they (the educators) tend to be less involved in risky behaviour*” (Ibid.: 10).

For young people, peer influence is very important. Most youths trust their fellows and ask them for advice and help when they face a difficult situation. It is, therefore, an inevitable fact that young people “*do better when their peers have positive, pro-social values, are engaged in the community, and have an opportunity to contribute to their family, school, workplace, and community*” (Ibid.). Youth-led organizations also provide an opportunity for young people to relate to their peers “*and contribute to creating positive youth communities*” (Ibid.).

Kathy from KCYP thinks that the youth groups are really important for Kibera because “*There are people who use drugs and youth groups can supply the community with information. They cannot help everyone because I had a friend who, while being in a group, continued using drugs but other kind of people, like me if I hadn’t been here, I don’t know what would I do right now. I really don’t know. They helped me to avoid other things, negative things and focus on the positive things of life.*”

Peers naturally create an impact on youths when it comes to the use of drugs¹¹. Young people in Kenya, and all around the world, tend to be easily influenced by their friends' substance use as revealed in the surveys cited in *Youth in Kenya* (Ibid.: 24). "Studies have shown that young people are more likely to engage in risky behaviour such as substance abuse when their friends do so" (Ibid.: 47).¹²

Gaby, a 21-year old boy, formed Mabadiliko Youth Group, MYG, with the objective of wiping out the drugs from his area. He believes that the youth-led organizations contribute to the reduction of crime and drug abuse among youths in Kibera. He thinks that by coming together, people can stop taking drugs more easily. "It is good to learn from somebody who was affected and now is clean. You find it easier if you share together. And it will keep you busy instead of being idle... I think that when people take drugs it is because of the peer pressure. You are smoking cigarettes, I am not smoking cigarettes which means I am not cool, you know. If my best friend smokes and I do not, there will be a big gap between us."

Leo from KCYP sees similar benefits of participating in a youth group. "I'm getting skills. Those skills found me here. I am changing. I have friends who are just sitting at a jobless corner and think in the way: 'I can't.' So they're sitting at the jobless corner, chewing miraa, smoking. I always wanted to change them, let them know, that they can choose to do something else."

Youth groups give a good example

The activities of youth groups help to reduce the bias older people have towards youngsters. People who are active members of community organizations provide a positive example for their community and, potentially, broader society. Moreover, as Mohammed from Kamsheg says, the importance of youth groups is that they "change what people think about Kibera. Coz out there, many people hear about Kibera in a negative way, so they think that it is a negative place. There are robbers, there are murderers, all of this bad stuff is found in Kibera. But when you come to the ground it is totally different from what you

11 By "taking drugs" the youths from Kibera often mean also drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes.

12 The most common legal substances used by young people were found to be alcohol, tobacco, *miraa* (or *khaat*), and inhalants such as glue and the illegal marihuana (also called *bhang*), cocaine and heroin. The incidence of drug abuse was found to be more frequent among males and the out-of-school youth than among students, a fact which could also be caused by the students under-reporting the extent of their substance abuse (Nacada 2004, cited in Muganda 2004 and World Bank 2005: 24).

hear, and it is because of the CBOs. So the CBOs change the lives of people living in here from the negative side to the positive.”

The group Pillars of Kibera, or POK, has also changed the perspective of adult people towards the youth. *“Some people thought that youth are involved in violence, drug abuse. But we contributed to reducing drug abuse in our area. There are no customers. You find that we have one hundred members.”*

Now, I will proceed to a short description of the importance of personal development that is often being neglected in the studies on development which is shallow in its focus on measurable and tangible issues.

Personal development matters

“Where there is youth there is a struggle for something, you see. And challenges are everywhere and they just try to make the best out of the challenges. We come up with solutions so that the previous challenges don’t bring us down. We know we are growing and we’re here to keep on.”

Haron, CVDRII

I wish to look closer at other non-material gains from participation in the youth-led organizations as the topic of personal development and psychological well-being does not seem to be very exposed compared to the issue of economic progress. As Robert Chambers (1995: 198) noticed, *“The personal dimension is as paramount as it is perversely overlooked... Psychologists and psychotherapists are rare among development professionals... It is, though, obvious to the point of embarrassment, that individual personality, perceptions, values, commitment and behaviour are crucial for institutional and professional change.”*

The literature of the development agencies also focuses mainly on material outcomes of all the undertakings. Concentration is directed to the results and the process itself is frequently not appreciated. I believe that it is not only the final goal that makes self-esteem and self-confidence, two of the building stones of personal developmental, growth. The path can be a goal in itself.

Firstly, membership in a youth group can enable behavioural and mental change. Kepha, from KCYP, thinks that the youth groups are *“doing a good work. Perhaps it may not be seen physically, but mentality of the young people can easily be modelled towards a certain direction by the influence of the CBOs. Because young people come together, speak their own languages, they can behave freely and this way they can easily access information and they can easily be reached and that means communication can easily flow and when communica-*

tion flows there is change of mentality towards positivity that we all are going towards. Now, it's upon them to act, because they got the information."

Seje from Shades Classics says that "... the youth-groups are formed to educate, inform and communicate the fellow youth because the youth listen more to the youth. So fellow youth tells you about AIDS, crime, drugs. So there is a behavioural change in the community through information and positive examples." And Cartoon from the same group adds: "One thing is that it (a youth group) acts as a place of change. You know when we are just home, although we might have talents but not until we bring them together, one boy, or a girl. We can create something, but this can't work when I am at home. We have to come together and form a youth group, that's when we come up with a CBO. And this is a place for nurturing your talent."

Members from Mashimoni Youth Group also believe that "there is a change of mind from being idle to do something. One can actually think of his future life. Because we do our capacity building. Sharing experience."

Secondly, participation in the community and personal development clearly enhances self-esteem and self-confidence.

According to Abraham Maslow (1943: 381), for all humans it is essential to be respected, to have self-respect, and to respect others.¹³ People can gain the desired respect through activities, be it professional or hobbies, that can provide them with the sense of contribution and through which they could feel accepted and valued. When a person feels capable, useful and necessary in the world, he is likely to be self-confident, his need for self-esteem is satisfied. And, as the World Bank (2005: 48) states, "Young people who have a positive self-image are less likely to engage in self-destructive risky behaviour such as substance abuse and risky sexual practices."

On the other hand, imbalances at the level of self-esteem produce feelings of inferiority and helplessness (Maslow 1943: 382). And young people in Kenya have only a few possibilities to find a satisfying job or other activities. There is a lack of opportunities for the realization of a person's potential. In this situation, the community organizations can also play a crucial role.

Fred from KCYP says on the issue of contribution of the youth groups to the development of the personality of their members that "Much is done through training, opening up, I mean, giving somebody self-esteem. Coz when

13 The American psychologist Abraham Maslow became mostly noted for his proposal of a hierarchy of human needs. He laid out five categories of basic needs: the physiological needs, the needs for safety and security, the needs for love and belonging, the needs for esteem, and the need to actualize the self, in that order.

you have a group of people, you can learn from others, from what are they doing and how. Because some people are closed up. With time, you find people who can talk and they can share out, for example through the training in public speaking. Now, one knows I can speak about my issues in this way and people listen. So it gives somebody self-esteem and also the skills, it means you are improving on yourself.”

Seje from Shades Classics adds: *“For example, when I first came to Shades, I was shy and timid, withdrawn, but with some time, Shades showed me how to be more bold, more... empowered, I can speak better. So this is one way how Shades is helping the members. When they come they are withdrawn but with the time they open up and become so self-confident.”*

After satisfying the first four basic human needs (see footnote 13), Maslow argues that we may still feel another discontent unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. *“A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be”* (Maslow 1943: 382). This need is called self-actualization. The term, first used by Kurt Goldstein refers to the instinctual human need to use fully people’s abilities and to strive to be the best they can. It is the desire for reaching one’s fullest potential (Ibid.).

We can observe that community organizations can play an important role in supporting young people’s talents, in realizing their potential. Those who want to become actors, singers or playwrights are given a chance to show their works to their fellow members and the community and through their organization, sometimes, they can find also material support and venues for performances. Moreover, the groups also act as places where a hidden potential or talent is discovered.

Frank from KCYP likes community work particularly for the reason he can teach people what he knows. *“I’ve never had a place where people would sit and listen to me. Sometimes, you have an idea that somebody doesn’t have but you don’t have a place where you could go and tell it to them. So in KCYP I have chance to talk to you, guys (volunteers from abroad), about things I know. Coz, maybe, I have an idea, I don’t know...”* And Frank continues to talk about this experience: *“The other day I was waiting at the junction and one girl greeted me. I didn’t know her but she told me: ‘Oh, you’re the one from KCYP, you came to my school.’ And that was great to hear.”*

Abzed Osman from Duduba Youth Group acknowledged that participation in a youth group affected his life. *“When I joined the group, suddenly, my talent came at the surface. I am a poet. Before, I didn’t know my talent. So I discovered my talent.”*

Cartoon from Shades Classics revealed: *“Me I wasn’t good at poems before joining the Shades Classics, but when I came here we had to do poems, so I had this push and spend more time trying to cram some poems but as time went I became good at that area in which I wasn’t.”*

I have outlined the perception of the youths of their contribution for development of the community and their own but I also want to show their perception of the place they are living in.

Kibera has beauty, too, you see...

Casual visitors come to places like Kibera to look for... what exactly? Photographers, tourists, reporters and NGOs staff keep picking up the most striking examples of poverty and display them as if it were the single most important reality. None of them is usually willing to make the effort and see that places where people live have some positive aspects and beauty, too, although it might be hidden from the visitor’s at first sight. For those who have never been to such a place it can be hard to imagine because they are massaged by testimonies of those who came there to ‘see how poverty is.’ Fulfilled expectations?!

...It was on the very first day: I immersed trembling in the dusty streets of Kibera, when I realized it, saw it, felt it... The lively atmosphere, the nice smile of my guide, the helpful attitude of the youth (really surprising when I consider the fact that I was the third *Mzungu*, White person, in the KCYP’s office). Let then people from KCYP say how I felt, and more importantly, how they feel about their home:

“People see guy from ghetto and they see drugs, AIDS, theft.

But Kibera has beauty, too.

It has all the good things, they’re just covered with mud.

When you wash out the mud you find gold... Kibera has beauty, too.

I have been empowered to know that!”

Frank, KCYP

Kathy, an 18 year old girl has also a very mature opinion: *“Life is just how you take it. If you take Kibera as a hard place to live in, a dangerous place, that is how it will be. But if you take it just like any other place, Kibera is a good place.”*

In the interviews I was interested not only in particular issues concerning the work of youth groups but also in the ‘life philosophies’ of my respondents. Their answers were truly inspiring. Fred, the director of KCYP answered after thinking a short while: *“... Life is no rehearsal. You live today and then it’s gone. So if you have some knowledge, if you have some skills you are supposed to ensure*

that apart from you there is somebody else who gains from that otherwise it is irrelevant for you to have lived this life if you cannot contribute to the welfare of others, I mean mankind, humanity.” You say irrelevant? “Yes, because what else have you lived for? For yourself? Only you, you?”

To conclude, everybody should be encouraged by Frank’s words: *“When you sacrifice, when you give in, it is the best way the universe gave you mercy in the future. We know, God is looking at us. And something comes. Just do your best without expectations and you will harvest one day“*

...So you see, Kibera has beauty, too. I have been empowered to know that...

And have YOU been empowered, too? Which one of the pictures below that create the reality of an urban slum is presented more often?



Informal dumping site in Kibera



Neat neighbourhood in Kibera

Lessons learned

Thanks to the qualitative anthropological research, the semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I was provided with an insight not

only into the work of the youth-led organizations but also, to a certain extent, to life ‘philosophies’ of its members which motivated me to look with “new eyes” on the reality of people living in a low-income settlement.

At first, I had desired to have more experience from the field and scientific work but later realized that my age and status of a student were of a great help in approaching my peers as well as my being willing to learn from them.

And I learnt a lot. I learnt that social capital is at a high level in Kibera and that the people I interviewed have a big love for their community which was an important motivation for them to join the activities.

I learnt that great potential can be found in Kibera and equally in all the world’s diverse hidden corners. I learnt that the development of society lies on the development of the individual. I understood the meaning of the phrase from the *Voices of the Poor Series* (Narayan et al. 2000A: 128): “*While structural change requires organization and time, mind-set and behavioural changes are within the control of individuals.*”

I also learnt that every human being seeks recognition and deserves to be treated with respect and not as an object of pity.

And finally I learnt that the ‘poor’ themselves should claim this respect. Perhaps merely by saying: *Who says that we are poor?!*

Conclusion

In this article, I tried to present some of my findings from the field, especially the importance of the activities of youth groups for the development of Kibera as perceived by the youth themselves. Although the results of their work might not be very visible in the context of the whole Kibera I believe that the presence of the groups is important in the way that they provide something that no other organization offers to young people from Kibera. They serve as a protection against negative peer pressure, they protect people who’ve finished high schools from staying idle, they provide them with some skills such as drama and music skills which are particularly valued, and also some practical knowledge. Sometimes, they also provide a modest income to their members from the income-generating activities.

Moreover, participation in the activities gives the youth a vision for the future and a sense of self-worth and usefulness. Through the various activities they gain self-esteem because their potential is used wisely and is expanding; some even claim to have discovered a new talent. The members feel they are being empowered by gaining the skills, by getting exposed, and by improving

on themselves. They believe that they can influence certain matters concerning them, and if they do not see the results now, the future will reward them.

In my thesis and articles I am trying to pursue the decision to highlight the positive things that are present in an environment where they are usually not looked for. However, I need to emphasize that this approach is not an approach of an idealist. I do realize that the experience of poverty is very diverse. The youth may live next-door to people who feel deprived by poverty and do not look with optimism to the future as poverty is indeed a harsh experience and no one, not even the youth I met, deny it. However, the very fact that it is often presented stereotypically when talking about powerlessness, exclusion, lack of self-esteem, links to crime etc., produced a desire to present the opinions of young people which do not completely match with this model. Moreover, the youth refused to be viewed as poor saying “*I am only poor when I am dead*”. These people may be in a way enlightened; too proud to lack self-esteem and too capable to be called powerless but their voice should be heard.

In the article I argued, that highlighting the capacities and similarities (be it the same potential of people from whatever country on the Earth) instead of lack of abilities and differences, caused by impoverished environments, could be a useful tool for the fight against the stigma or “*lack of acceptance*”. In spite of trying to induce new, the so called participatory strategies for poverty reduction, the discourse is still a bit far from recognizing people from low-income areas as partners in the development. Equalities, not differences, must be considered. Saying what the “others” can and are able to do is the fair way to create a change. But such change requires the involvement of people from the whole World, not only the “Third World”.

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