

**Sociologists without Borders  
Nairobi Fellowship**

**Field Report  
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## **Introduction**

It is with a heavy heart that I write this report about Kibera. I am torn because I want to convey the positive aspects as they emerge from the overwhelmingly negative stereotypes of the urban poor in Africa. The September issue of National Geographic, staring at me from my desk, points out the increasing growth of urban slums, and Kibera stands as the epitome of this escalation. The most recent Human Development Index put out by the United Nations Development Programme also highlights Kenya's fall in recent years, due in part to the government not addressing the needs and concerns of the poorest in its population. These reports have saddened me and I find that is much easier to write about the failures rather than the successes of urban planning in Kenya. In part, I think it is a reflection of how I have been conditioned in America to view Africa, despite experiences that have taught me to look beyond black and white. When I am there, I am caught up in the moment, but when I return home and read about where I have just been, I start to make connections that often fall on the negative side.

A few days before I left Kibera in August, I had a conversation with Buddy, a friend of Carolina for Kibera who belongs to one of the youth groups with whom they work. He is a Nubian, so he knows no other place than Nairobi as his home. His birthplace is important due to the ubiquitous Kenyan question "where are you from?" No one comes from Nairobi; everyone has a village. The Nubian populations first settled Kibera and were given the land on the outskirts of Nairobi after their service in the King's African Rifles for the British government. Buddy is proud of his home, even though its external shell is less than desirable. We had an argument that day because I had said something to the effect that Kiberans were poor. Buddy would not hear of it. The residents in Kibera, to him, are not poor – in fact, I think "poor" was a word that he was tired of hearing. He claimed that they had water; they could always find food. Hadn't I seen the people with very big houses? This went on, until I asked him about future security. Could very many people in Kibera know what their future held for them? Weren't they always worried about the possibility of slum demolition, where their next meal would originate, or how they would make money tomorrow? Wasn't this type of insecurity a manifestation of poverty even if at the present there was some comfort? This conversation, days before I was to leave Kenya, left me feeling as though I needed to reevaluate what I had been doing for two and a half months. Was I really just there because I thought some poor people needed my help?

## **Where I was...**

Sociologists without Borders partners with an organization called Carolina for Kibera in its sponsorship of the Nairobi Fellowship. Carolina for Kibera is a non-governmental organization initially founded to address issues of ethnic violence among young people in the sprawling slum of Kibera, but has expanded to become a center with broader goals. The organization supports a health clinic, a soccer organization, a girls' center, as well as a new project that works with local youth groups on an income-generating project to turn garbage into money. The leadership consists of local residents who have the experience to run a viable and sustainable organization dedicated to addressing the needs of youth in Kibera.

While Kibera does have its own special needs, it is a slum among many in the capital city of Kenya. It enjoys (or suffers) international notoriety as being one of the largest slums in sub-Saharan Africa. As many as 800,000 people are said to live in a space that is roughly the size of New York's Central Park. They live in homes that are often made of mud and rusted corrugated iron sheets. The diversity of Kenya's peoples is replicated here as people from all over Kenya migrate to the city and settle among the mud and garbage of Kibera. The call to prayer, Sunday processions to independent

churches and the range of languages spoken all speak to the diversity of this location. Extreme poverty is present, but the prosperous live among the poor, often holding deeds as landlords on unofficial tracts of land. Land-grabbing and government corruption have contributed to the haphazard manner that buildings are constructed, and Kibera's residents are under the constant threat of slum demolitions. If their homes are built too near to the railway tracks that run through the location, or if they happen to be on a piece of land that is targeted for formal development, they run the risk of having their homes destroyed, which would force them to rebuild or rent in another area.

When I first arrived in Kibera, I was eager to find out why people were giving up their rural homes to come to the city. A few years before, I had lived in Nairobi for a year and a half without visiting Kibera, though I had seen the poverty in other areas of the city. While much of it is hidden by the treed boulevards and modern growth of the Western City, poverty presents itself in Nairobi in the shape of begging street kids, roadside garbage, disabled panhandlers, and the viewpoints from major highways which give passing glances at valleys filled with shanties. My first visit to a slum in Nairobi, Korogocho slum in Nairobi's Eastlands, had left me filled with questions of why people were leaving their land in the countryside to live in squalor, among open sewers and great insecurity. What was so appealing about this city that it could draw people in droves? Urban growth rates in East Africa rank among the highest in the world, but this growth is not usually connected with economic growth. Unemployment is rampant and young men sitting on the roadsides have little formal work to do. Why does everyone want to live in the big city?

When pressed to discuss the issue, a staff member at CFK's clinic told me that it was "boring" in shago (the slang term for Kenya's rural areas). This came after I received a half-hour long lecture on the problems in Kibera. Apparently, relative physical security does not compare to the allure of Kenya's urban life, where there is always something going on. There is little to keep the young and educated in places upcountry because there is no commerce or entertainment. Someone explained to me that the opportunity to make money or find a way to preoccupy oneself is higher in Nairobi. They may live hand to mouth, but they are not without options. Often, however, these opportunities present themselves in illicit and dangerous ways. Between the time that I left Nairobi originally in July of 2003 and when I returned in June this year, I have noticed a significant change in the ways that people describe their security. Both in Kibera and the wider Nairobi area, people are worried about real possibilities of being robbed while riding public transportation or walking home from work and of having their homes invaded. Very few people feel safe in this capital city.

To give an example of the external environment in which Kibera is situated, it may be useful to describe the city's contrasts. The city is made up of roughly three million people. While there are positive signs that a significant middle class is rising, the majority of the city's residents fall in to the categories of rich and poor. A Member of Parliament, a UN official, or a top embassy worker will likely live in a guarded compound in the city's northern and western suburbs. They will pay \$2000 (140,000 Shillings) a month in rent, will buy a big SUV complete with a driver and eat in swanky restaurants in upmarket shopping centers. They will pay 200 shillings for beer and pay cover charges to enter the newest discos. They will buy new imported clothing at city boutiques and they will serve imported cheeses from France at their dinner parties. This life will be cheap and comfortable.

In contrast, the typical resident of Kibera lives on less than 100 Shillings a day. In the slum's markets, everything is pared down and priced in quantities to buy at 5 Shillings each. Little packets of sugar, flour, and tea are all these residents can afford. There is no stocking up to save for later.

Their house rents may range from \$12-24 (1000-2000 Shillings) a month depending on how many rooms they have and whether or not it is necessary to have an electric connection or a toilet. For those in formal work as domestic servants, guards or taxi drivers, a monthly wage of 6000 Shillings does not go far considering there are often school fees to pay, unexpected medical expenses or a death in the family that brings relatives knocking on the door. If there is extra money, men, mostly men, will find their way to a pub where they will spend 60 Shillings on a half-liter of legal beer or 10 Shillings for tin can of an illicit alcoholic beverage distilled by the river. To clothe themselves, they will dig through piles of welfare clothing from the United States and Europe, paying 40 Shillings for shirts or 60 Shillings for a skirt.

It is under these conditions that the young of Kibera (and, indeed, other slums of Nairobi) are being raised. Most families share one meal a day together and if they are lucky they will have a bag of fries for a mid-day snack. The reports of sexual assault, early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) transmission are also very high among these young people. Malaria, cholera and environmental diseases that have been eradicated from Nairobi's affluent suburbs are a reality for residents living in Kibera, along the polluted waters of the Nairobi River. Crimes ranging from pick pocketing to armed home invasions also present challenges for the residents there. In general, it is a seemingly tragic place to live.

### **What I did...**

This summer I worked with a group of young women who belong to an organization called the Binti Pamoja Centre (Binti Pamoja means Daughters United in Kiswahili). These are young ladies aged between 13 and 20 who are being given opportunities to express themselves through drama, dance and newsletter writing. The idea was to provide a safe place for girls to come together and be girls, away from their responsibilities at home and school. The program is meant to increase their self-confidence and teach them to talk about the problems they face as girls in Kibera, and take initiative in trying to solve them. A by-product of this is that they are also trained to communicate with their peers at school and in the community and lead peer education sessions engaging these young people in discussions about various topics.

I had originally laid out a plan to begin an income-generating newspaper project because I believed that one of the major difficulties facing the urban poor was inaccessibility to jobs. When I arrived I found a pre-existing newsletter that Binti Pamoja had been producing for close to a year. Through consultation with the staff at CFK, it was decided that I would try to reformat this newsletter and increase its circulation in Kibera. This newsletter has been typically used as a forum for interested Binti Pamoja girls to improve their writing skills and to address the concerns and needs of young women in Kibera. The girls have drawn from their experiences and ideas to write articles about topics like rape, boy-girl relationships, and STIs. Past newsletters have featured drawings and poems created by the girls. Typically, these articles were written in English with a smattering of Sheng, a dialect of Kiswahili that heavily mixes English, Kiswahili and the other native languages in Kenya. The newsletter was being produced quarterly and photocopied and distributed at the center's outreach programs, which included drama and dance performances as well as peer-to-peer exchange meetings which addressed a variety of topics significant to youth.

The newsletter basically lacked aesthetic appeal and focus, though the content was interesting and varied. Through consultations with the girls and the director of the Binti Pamoja Centre, I immediately began to make it more aesthetically pleasing and standardized. The first goal was to make it appealing to youth. I used as a model The Daily Nation and The Standard, two newspapers

in Kenya that have sections oriented toward youth. Typically, they feature youth culture and print articles about education, music and fashion. I found it useful to analyze the ways that these newspapers sought to appeal to young audiences through the type of language they used and their stylish layout. In designing our newsletter Tunanego (Sheng for “let’s talk”), we also incorporated some aspects of youth culture by inserting Sheng phrases into the headers of pages. Also, instead of photocopies, we chose instead to have the newsletters printed onto newsprint with the front and back pages printed in two colors.

Before the August edition came out I held writing workshops for the girls, first with the larger group of the Binti Pamoja Centre and then with just the girls interested in writing for the newsletter. We talked about how they might be able to appeal more to their peers. We worked on a theme that they chose and decided who would best be suited to write about what. August’s newsletter is focused predominantly on how young women in Kibera view recent political attempts to improve quality of life through slum demolitions and the building of new structures for Kibera’s poor. While working on this newsletter with the girls, I tried to instill in them a sense that they could take risks and write about things that were outside of what they knew. Mostly what I discovered was that it was more enlightening to see how they describe what they do know. In an illuminating article in August’s newsletter, a Binti girl, Alice, interviews her friend about her daily activities. We modeled this assignment off of a segment on a Kenyan news station called “My Day with You.” She says something to the effect that “you do a lot of work in a day” after the girl had detailed her day of washing clothes, cooking dinner, doing her homework and attending football practice. To Alice’s comment, her respondent replies, “I am a girl, that is my job.”

### **What I learned...**

I received an email from a Kenyan friend recently that was lamenting the American government’s efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. He wrote to me “you know that we here in Kenya know what poverty and deprivation are coz [sic] we experience the extremes of both. But we are happy staying in our shacks that go for homes/houses and with our families and clans, than be bundled into shelters to feed off Uncle sam’s handouts that arrive after many have died off.” For me, his comments reflect a similar feeling I have about how outsiders should go about effecting change. Someone told me something important while I was Kenya this last time. They told me that I knew poverty, which meant that I did not pity the poor. Instead, I was there to help when help was asked for.

There is a push in the Kenyan government to finally do something about these sprawling slums in Nairobi. They are proposing that all of the people be cleared from the area and taken somewhere else while they redevelop it and build low-income housing. These would then be available for rent by the current residents. What many people in Nairobi are trying desperately to understand is why many residents in Kibera are fighting this upgrade. The Kibera residents have said that they do not want the hand of the government to change their lives like this, nor do they trust that their government is unmotivated by political interests. Even though it has been repeated many times, we must constantly remind ourselves that development should come from the bottom, using local knowledge to create change. When I was visiting a community center in rural Machakos, Kenya I read on the wall:

### If you want to succeed:

- Go to the people

- Live with the people
- Learn from them
- Start with what they know
- Build with what the community has
- But with the best leaders
- When the work is done
- And the task is accomplished
- The people will say:

We have done it ourselves

What I've realized over the past several months is that the society that has been built in Kibera is not related to the urban society that surrounds it. Within the wattle and daub houses, along the garbage-strewn paths, the poorest people in the city have built a community. It has never been a priority of the government to address their needs and so they have therefore not grown to depend on government intervention. In fact, the government tends to hinder positive growth in Kibera on almost a daily basis. This is specifically ironic because the Minister for Roads, Public Works and Housing also happens to be the area's Member of Parliament.

For example, one of the youth groups associated with CFK's trash project wanted to build a sorting shed that they would use to sort trash they collected from the community into piles of recyclable materials. In order to do this they required a permit and signoff from the village chief (Kibera is divided into villages, each governed by a chief and a council of elders). Years of rampant corruption have left an imprint in the chiefs and they often expect *chai* (a bribe) in exchange for their approval. This youth group did not provide the *chai*, so a group of young men were sent to stop the building and confiscate the materials. The staff at CFK, well known in the community, spent many hours negotiating and renegotiating so that the group would have a sorting shed in the end.

It is this sort of community initiative that made my time in Kibera a rewarding experience. Clearly it is not perfect, nor is it even on its way to becoming perfect, but people in Kenya are resilient. I see in the girls at Binti Pamoja many strengths, and see in them determination to help their community. Given the opportunity, they laugh and gossip and flirt, just like teenagers across the world. *Maisha ni ngumu* (Life is hard), but it is not impossible. It's true what Buddy said. Kiberans are not poor, although they lack the resources and property that we associate with wealth. Despite the reports and surveys and experts proclaiming the horror of this growing urban slum, after a couple months working there I came away with a positive impression of their resourcefulness and determination to maintain a sense of community and normalcy that those on the outside do not imagine they have. Kibera is a reflection of Nairobi—rich in diversity, brimming with potential, and a place where there is always something to do.