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Empowering the Urban Poor to Realize the Right to Housing: Community-Led Slum Upgrading in Huruma, Nairobi

Kamukam Etyang'

Abstract

This article seeks to examine community-led upgrading initiatives, with particular emphasis on lessons learnt from the collaboration between Pamoja Trust, Muungano wa Wanavijiji (MWW) and the City Council of Nairobi (CCN) in Huruma, Nairobi. The article shall highlight processes that have facilitated relative success of participatory approaches in Huruma's six villages, including the crucial role played by multi-sector partnerships and the role of citizens in realizing the right to housing. It shall give measures aimed at keeping the overall project costs significantly low as well as presenting potential areas for scaling up such initiatives in other settlements.

Introduction

Slum upgrading efforts in Kenya have for many years been faced with numerous challenges. While there have been several interventions, they have largely remained ineffective owing to lack of clear policy direction and conflicting interests. Such attempts were largely driven by the need to clear slums and replace them with what has often been called 'decent housing'. In the process, there have been site and service schemes such as the one in Dandora and more recently, the Kenya Slum Upgrading Project (KENSUP) in Kibera.

The challenge of slum upgrading has always brought into focus the interrelation between provision of housing infrastructure and political will that would result in increased investments in the informal settlements aside from infusion of mechanisms that would ensure social cohesion and collective responsibility. But amidst the perceived policy vacuum, there have been attempts at recognizing the legitimate role of low-income settlers and other stakeholders in urban development. Previously, the right to housing was relegated to the periphery, in comparison to the clamour for realization of other human rights.

It therefore came as a relief when the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government, in its manifesto, made provision for upgrading of slums and informal settlements. In what became a basis for the housing policy, the manifesto provided for, among other things, ways of managing the housing inputs namely land, infrastructure, building materials, building technology and finances (Kusienya, 2004). This spirit was also carried forth in the newly promulgated Kenyan constitution which now anchors the right to housing within the Bill of Rights. Article 43 of the constitution provides for the right to accessible and adequate housing and to reasonable standards of sanitation (Government of Kenya, 2010).

These and several other articles in the constitution present opportunities in the fight for secure tenure and improved living conditions, particularly in informal settlements. But it is worth

noting that, within slum communities, a house is much more than a space and dwelling unit. It is a utility as it offers space for commerce. The small-scale launderer and the vegetable vendor all operate from their homes. Slum upgrading is therefore not a matter of building decent houses; it is also about taking into account intricacies of life in urban slums while striking a balance between affordable housing and an innate need for survival.

Some existing models present interesting conundrums, questions of how one now makes a living from the third floor of a two-bedroomed flat, while they previously eked a living from the home-shop at market street level. Other approaches, while trying to involve community participation, fail to involve community members in processes such as construction. Such approaches have inevitably contributed to the never-ending cycle of proliferation of slums and slum upgrading initiatives.

In contrast, community led processes have the potential of tackling the nagging issues related to community ownership and involvement. This is because such models are built around basic human rights tenets that foster empowerment of the marginalized, democratic processes and equal participation. These principles when studied against Kenya's new constitution imply that, while the government is bound to provide policy direction on matters pertinent to progressive realization of the right to housing, citizens have the responsibility of ensuring that they actively contribute and participate in such processes.

Pamoja Trust in Huruma

Pamoja Trust is a non-profit making organization that seeks to promote access to land, shelter and basic services for the urban poor. It grew from the need for institutional support for the anti-evictions movement that arose and grew in Kenya in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Pamoja Trust collaborates closely with *Muungano wa Wanavijiji* (MWW), a federation of over 60,000 households living in 400 informal settlements across Kenya, helping to form daily savings groups through which poor communities can access crucial resources.

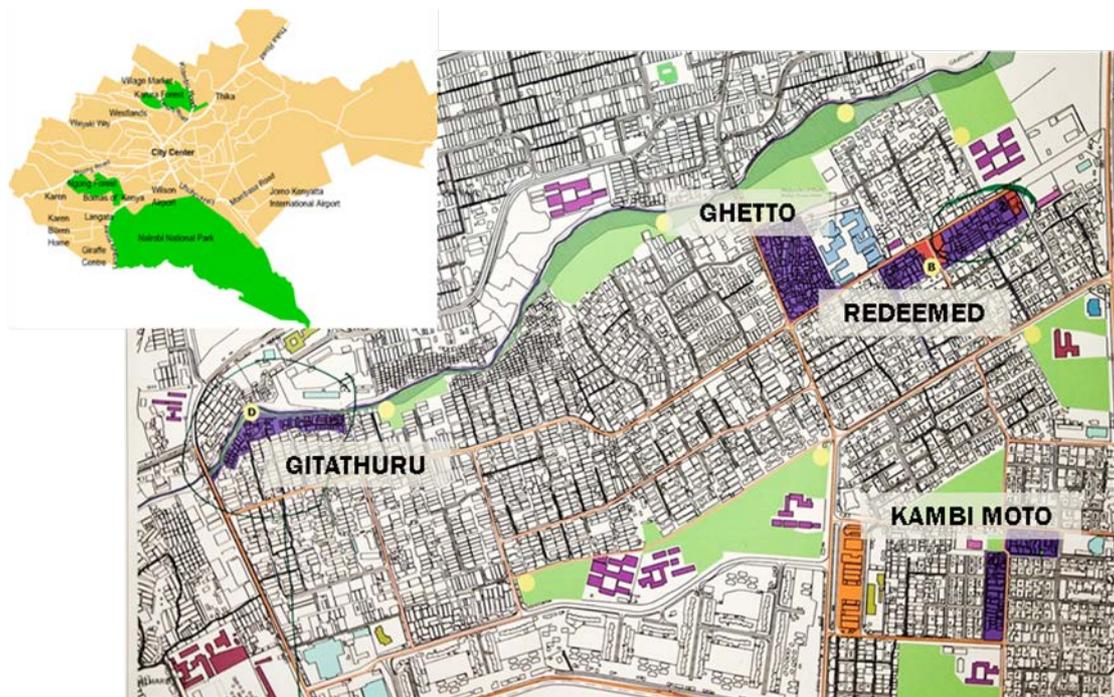
MWW is a federation of slum dwellers that was formed in 1996 as a network of slums in Nairobi and Athi River. It was formed by slum dwellers facing eviction threats, as an avenue for resistance against brutal evictions and land grabbing that was rampant from the mid 1990s to early 2000s. Over the last seven years, Pamoja Trust and MWW have engaged slum communities in what can be referred to as a community-led slums upgrading initiative.

The community-led upgrading approach allows slum communities to take charge of the actual upgrading processes. It mainly works through harnessing of community resources and using the pool to leverage for partnerships and additional resources from Local Authorities, financial intermediaries and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). This process is a clear testament that, when given an opportunity, slum communities can offer solutions that foster inclusivity and ownership of outcomes while at the same time, addressing multiple facets of slum upgrading processes. Furthermore, overall costs per unit have been kept significantly low due to the use of replicable building components, incremental construction, employment of sweat equity and

other low cost building technologies.

This approach has been successfully implemented in Huruma settlement. Huruma is located in Mathare Ward of Starehe Constituency in Nairobi and it is comprised of six villages i.e. Kambi Moto, Mahira, Ghetto, Ex Grogan, Redeemed and Gitathuru. The six villages were first inhabited in the 1970s and they have a combined size of approximately 4 hectares with over 2,700 households. The City Council of Nairobi (CCN) holds the title to the land (Pamoja Trust, 2010).

Figure 1: Four of the six Huruma villages



Source: Pamoja Trust and Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI), 2009.

Before the upgrading, housing structures in these villages were typically 12 by 10 foot shacks built from mud and wattle, with iron sheet roofs and earth floors. Basic services such as water, sewage, road access, and toilets were also inadequate and sometimes non-existent at the time. The project concept was derived from the CCN Informal Settlements Development Strategy on Slum Upgrading. This strategy provided for a broad set of guidelines governing upgrading and it stressed the importance of community involvement at all stages. The principal implementing agency of the strategy in Huruma was the Department of City Planning. This department undertook several activities in regard to tenure regularization for Kambi Moto, Mahira, Redeemed, Ghetto, Gitathuru and Ex Grogan villages in Huruma. This strategy also formed the basis for partnerships between the community and the CCN to enable a holistic slum upgrading.

In 2003, negotiations between the communities and the CCN resulted in the declaration of a special planning zone for the sole purpose of upgrading. This was done in accordance with the Physical Planning Act of 1996 that provided for delineation of land for such purposes. Subsequently, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Huruma community, Pamoja Trust and the CCN was developed. Initially, the MoU covered 4 of the 6 villages i.e. Kambi Moto, Mahira and Gitathuru and Ghetto. Other settlements have since been allowed to proceed with upgrading initiatives on the strength of this MoU. Key components of this initiative included: (1) mobilization and setting up of savings schemes; (2) mapping and enumeration exercises; (3) house dreaming and (4) construction.

Mobilization and Setting Up of Savings Schemes

Mobilizing any community around agendas such as land and housing is a challenge. The history of tenure in Kenya generates a lot of tension and suspicion, particularly among the urban poor. This situation called for continuous engagement with key influential people, including village elders and civic leaders. This mobilization allowed for more open discussions on the upgrading process and in so doing, important aspects such as gender mainstreaming and equal representation were emphasized. This ensured that women and other vulnerable groups were empowered and gained invaluable knowledge in the course of the upgrading exercise

Figure 2: Community members present their daily savings books for update



Source: Pamoja Trust, 2010.

To facilitate mobilization, a number of community forums were held and these served to consolidate community participation from the initial stages. Such community forums brought together community members, representation from various interest groups, religious and political leadership as well as members of the influential Provincial Administration and village

elders. The goal of these sessions was to gauge community perceptions, identify needs and secure an all-rounded approach to the project.

Alongside mobilization, savings schemes were established in Huruma's six villages. The process allowed for community members to save as little as KShs 5 per day (USD 0.05)¹. The savings model was flexible to the extent that it took cognizance of each individual saver's financial ability. The structure is such that the appointed collector moves around collecting monies from each household, while receiving or disseminating information in the settlement. Each savings scheme manages its finances through a bank account. A dedicated construction account was also set up and this facilitated transfer of project funds from the financial intermediary. During the mobilization phase, specialized teams were set up to oversee the project and audits. These teams operated alongside others which included advocacy, welfare, savings and loans as well as Muungano Development Funds (MDF).

Mapping and Enumeration Exercises

Mapping and enumeration exercises were conducted to establish the total number of residents, assess their needs and provide a stronger advocacy tool that is based on specific issues (Pamoja Trust, 2011). Enumeration exercises involved door-to-door collection of socio-economic information and were largely community driven. The enumerations were conducted using questionnaires that were administered after rigorous consensus building by community members and other interested stakeholders. Subsequently, the community members were involved in the actual data collection as well as keying it in. Preliminary data findings were displayed, setting off a verification process that allowed for the rest of the community to ascertain that the information indeed reflected the state of the settlement.

Figure 3: Community-led mapping and enumerations



Source: Pamoja Trust, 2009.

¹ 1 USD = 93 Kenyan Shillings (September, 2011).

A mapping exercise was simultaneously conducted with the enumerations exercise and this served to identify actual physical features and mark the extent of the settlement. The main objective was to facilitate generation of accurate data that allowed for effective planning. Physical mapping was necessary, given the crowded nature of the settlement, and a satellite image was used as a base map.

House Dreaming

With information obtained from the mapping and enumerations exercises, the community initiated discussions on issues such as housing and service provision. House dreaming and design were then carried out and of note here was the utmost regard taken in ensuring minimal spill over of residents. These suggestions were presented to an architect during a community meeting after which, the architect modified “the community dream” to suit the number of families and the size of land. The final design agreed upon by the community was then presented, in the form of a cloth model, to the whole community, the general public, the CCN and other stakeholders. During the presentation, the would-be-beneficiaries were able to critique the model in terms of suitability and practicability. This presentation formed the official launch of the upgrading programme.

Figure 4: Community members discussing their housing dreams



Source: Pamoja Trust, 2005.

Construction

After the necessary approval by the CCN, the first phase of upgrading began in Kambi Moto. The construction process relied heavily on community labour which was converted into sweat equity. This was one of the components that facilitated the considerably lower cost outlay for the initiative. Other cost reducing measures included the use of pre-cast elements and incremental construction.

Figure 5: A community member producing pre-cast elements



Source: Pamoja Trust, 2010.

Figure 6: Construction in progress



Source: Pamoja Trust, 2010.

Incremental construction allowed for building of a starter house that had a living area, a kitchenette and a combined toilet and bathroom on the ground floor. Subsequent phases were implemented depending on the level of individual savings. Replicable pre-cast elements such as

beams and *ladiis* were used, drawing lessons from the Indian Slum Federation. These were used in putting up staircases, windowsills, lintels and the foundation of the top level. Routine training on core construction skills and assembly of precast elements was done and this ensured optimum knowledge and skill transfer. To date, this initiative has seen the construction of over 200 housing units in Kambi Moto, Mahira, Gitathuru, Ghetto and Redeemed.

Figure 7: Kambi Moto main street



Source: Pamoja Trust, 2009.

Figure 8: A housing unit in Kambi Moto



Source: Claudio Allia, 2009.

Challenges

Such initiatives, including government driven processes, have been implemented amidst a policy vacuum. There still lacks a comprehensive Slums Upgrading Policy that would in essence spell out minimum requirements and benchmarks for any such process. Nevertheless, it is important to marshal community involvement for any slum upgrading initiative to be considered a success. Of paramount concern for the residents is the need to improve housing conditions and acquire secure tenure. Success or failure of any strategy relies solely on community involvement while addressing concerns associated with sustainability, prohibitive costs and project ownership mechanisms.

In implementing the upgrading process in Huruma, the communities were aware of these issues and of critical concern was the tenure situation. While strides had been made in the signing of the MoU with the CCN, it was against a backdrop of the fact that land is a finite resource and its availability, particularly in urban areas, is limited. As is the case in Huruma, the CCN holds the title to the land. Transfer of ownership is a cumbersome process and so far, the community is yet to claim ownership to the land. The registration processes are usually long, slow and sometimes allow loopholes for fraud.

Another key challenge is financing. Finance institutions were averse to lending money for housing to low income groups due to the perceived risks in repayment. This made the Huruma community resort to informal credit sources that were expensive and mostly short term. In mitigation, a financing mechanism was instituted i.e. the outfit leveraged community savings for further funding from partners which resulted in the establishment of a community mortgage facility. However, there is still need for deliberate investment in non-conventional micro-finance institutions in order to bridge the gap between formal and informal financing options. It also calls for financial innovation that would include tapping social security funds for housing and encouraging domestic savings in order to facilitate delivery of affordable housing.

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