

AFRICAN CITIES
RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

NAIROBI: CITY SCOPING STUDY

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Nairobi is a thriving economic, cultural and political capital, but strongly marked by its inequitable colonial history and complex patterns of exclusionary development. Recent devolution reforms, policy commitments to affordable housing and public transport, and upgrading partnerships in Nairobi's informal settlements may provide important opportunities for interventions that can address inequalities. The city benefits from vibrant civil society and grassroots movements, a flourishing tech sector (particularly based on mobile technologies and platforms like M-PESA), and strong academic capacities as well as applied research networks. The Nairobi Metropolitan Services has recently improved local services and infrastructure delivery, but there are significant concerns about its military character.

More general concerns are related to the potential for democratic backsliding, in addition to Nairobi's elevated levels of poverty, food insecurity and police brutality (especially during the Covid-19 pandemic). The city faces formidable challenges in providing decent shelter and livelihoods, addressing multiple sources of violence and overcoming entrenched divides. Nairobi residents may face inequalities based on income, gender, age, ethnicity and migration status, as well as linked to access to land and often corrupt, elitist governance. The following scoping study will summarise Nairobi's context and challenges, such as inadequate shelter and multiple health risks, before discussing key political developments and opportunities.

URBAN CONTEXT

Founded in 1899 as a transport and administrative depot for the Kenya-Uganda Railway, Nairobi benefits from a temperate climate, river networks and fertile soils.¹ British residents during the colonial era typically lived in better-elevated western areas, while Indian railway workers and African workers were confined to low-lying, flood-prone eastern areas.² This profound socio-spatial divide continues to define Nairobi, even as the city's divisions are increasingly socio-economic rather than along racial lines, with informal settlements (commonly referred to as "slums") often concentrated in the same areas as colonial-era African zones.³ By 2013, about 160 informal settlements housed over 429,000 households (out of Nairobi's 1 million households) on less than 5% of the land.⁴ Most of these informal rental units are owned by wealthy, politically well-connected absentee landlords.⁵ Nairobi has recently aspired to "world-class" city status and prioritised "smart city" strategies,⁶ but vigorous efforts are needed to tackle its profound inequalities. Nairobi also has a vibrant mainstream media and active social media, with the latter increasingly supporting advocacy by civil society organisations.⁷

Nairobi's primacy in Kenya's urban system is unrivalled, and its rapid expansion will continue, though settlement patterns are becoming increasingly complex. Currently encompassing 704 km² of land,⁸ Nairobi has massively expanded from around 11,000 residents living on 3.84 km² of land in 1910.⁹

1 Otiso (2019).

2 Hake (1977); Anyamba (2011).

3 Corburn and Makau (2016).

4 Lines and Makau (2017).

5 Amis (1984); Gulyani and Talukdar (2008).

6 Myers (2015); Guma and Monstadt (2020).

7 Nyabola (2018).

8 KNBS (2019b).

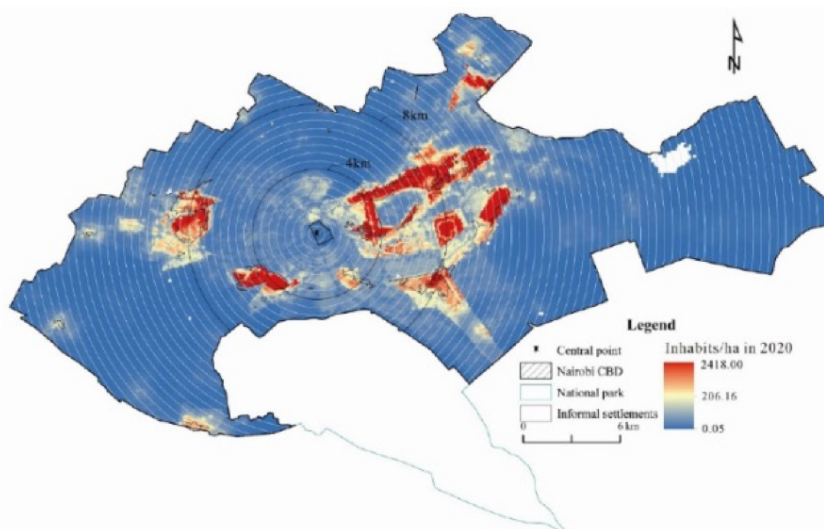
9 Owuor and Mbatia (2012).

Table 1: Population density changes in selected informal settlements (2000-2020)

| Settlement Name | Area in hectares (ha) | Inhabitants/ha in 2000 | Inhabitants/ha in 2010 | Inhabitants/ha in 2020 | Net Increased Inhabitants/ha (2000 - 2020) |
|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--|
| Huruma | 78.14 | 614.44 | 911.93 | 1381.42 | 766.98 |
| Kibera | 287.13 | 439.43 | 671.88 | 985.70 | 546.27 |
| Mathare | 100.70 | 329.72 | 519.27 | 804.99 | 475.27 |
| Dandora | 182.15 | 248.61 | 403.18 | 585.31 | 336.7 |
| Korogocho | 99.74 | 281.84 | 481.86 | 588.93 | 307.09 |
| Mukuru Kwa Njenga | 133.21 | 155.26 | 257.00 | 358.74 | 203.48 |
| Viwandani | 167.11 | 140.22 | 91211.09 | 306.58 | 166.36 |

Source: Ren et al. (2020)

Figure 1: Nairobi's population density grid in 2020 (excluding national park)



Source: Ren et al. (2020)

With 293,000 residents in 1960, the city's population jumped to 1.38 million in 1990, 3.30 million in 2010, and 4.34 million in 2019.¹⁰ Its annual average rate of change was 3.81% from 2015 to 2020 and is projected to reach 3.94% from 2020 to 2025.¹¹ In 2015, about 32% of Kenya's urban population lived in Nairobi, which far exceeded the 9.1% residing in Kenya's second largest city, Mombasa.¹² Densities in Nairobi vary markedly, peaking in Mathare at 68,941 people per km² (Table 1). Recent trends in Nairobi include densification in informal settlements and tenements, burgeoning metropolitan growth in nearby towns (such as Thika) and several planned satellite cities.¹³

Despite Nairobi's profusion of tech start-ups, professional services and manufacturing industries, many residents can only engage in precarious informal livelihoods. From 2013 to 2017, Nairobi County's output comprised 21.7% of Kenya's national GDP (vs. Nakuru's 6.1% and Mombasa's 4.7%) with leading sectors being manufacturing, construction and professional, technical and support services.¹⁴ There can be important linkages and interplay between formal and informal firms,¹⁵ but most of Nairobi's jobs are in the

10 KNBS and Republic of Kenya (2019).
 11 UN-DESA (2018).
 12 Ibid.
 13 Mwau, Sverdlik and Makau (2020).
 14 KNBS (2019).
 15 Meagher (2013).

informal economy. In the informal settlements of Korogocho and Viwandani, approximately 62% of residents engage in informal casual work, petty trade or are unemployed.¹⁶ Across Kenya in 2019, the informal sector generated nearly 91% of total new jobs created outside of small-scale agriculture.¹⁷ Although the informal economy is quite diverse, food insecurity and poverty are frequent, serious concerns for informal workers. This has particularly been the case during Covid-19.¹⁸

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Kenya's central government elections have often been associated with heightened insecurity (including in Nairobi's informal settlements), and the nation's profound divisions linked to wealth, land and ethnicity are still unresolved. Following independence in 1963, President Jomo Kenyatta increasingly repressed the political opposition while supporting pro-market growth policies. Furthermore, Kenyatta sought to ensure that fellow elites (largely from the Kikuyu ethnic group) benefited from patronage systems and he showed little concern for redistribution.¹⁹ After succeeding Kenyatta in 1978, President Daniel Moi soon instituted a de jure one-party state, catering for a narrow set of (mainly Kalenjin ethnic group) elites, and he utilised increasingly authoritarian tactics during the 1980s' economic crisis alongside rampant grabbing of public lands.²⁰ Multi-party elections were reintroduced in 1992, but Moi retained power until 2002, due to a fragmented opposition and political intimidation.²¹ Multi-party elections in 1992 and 1997 were marred by significant ethnic violence and displacement; in 2007-08 over 1,000 people were killed and 600,000 displaced, including clashes in some of Nairobi's informal settlements.²² Currently, Kenya has a "competitive-clientelist" political settlement characterised by relatively high levels of elite cohesion and entrenched patronage politics often linked to ethnicity.²³ Ethnicity is just one of several (often interrelated) identities, and its political salience should not be overstated. Many reports recognise that "land problems lie at the heart of Kenyan politics", with land-grabbing especially rife in Nairobi.²⁴

There are longstanding tensions between Nairobi's national government and the city's leaders, as underscored in the recent establishment of Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS). After 1963, Nairobi's city council became notorious for land-grabbing and seeking to curtail any political rivals; planning was largely ignored and the metropolitan growth strategy (1973) never implemented.²⁵ Given Nairobi's political and economic significance, it is unsurprising that Kenyan presidents repeatedly intervened in its administration. For instance, in the 1980s, Moi appointed the city council in an (unsuccessful) attempt to improve service delivery.²⁶ More recently, President Uhuru Kenyatta instructed the NMS to replace the controversial governor, Mike Sonko, undercutting democratic local governance, but again promising to improve services.²⁷

POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY

Reflecting limited policy recognition or undercoverage of informal workers and informal settlements, official data may significantly underestimate Nairobi's levels of poverty. Using a poverty line of about \$1.98/day in 2016, government data found low levels of poverty in Nairobi: 22% of children, 12% of youths, 16% of adults and 19% of elderly residents classified as poor.²⁸ However, other findings indicate that most households in informal settlements face "chronic poverty" (over three years of deprivation, with a poverty line of \$1.90/day). From 2015 to 2018, 54% of households in the informal settlement of Viwandani were in chronic poverty and 76% of households in another informal settlement, Korogocho,

16 Buigut, Ettarh and Amendah (2015). Many findings discussed below are from the African Population Health and Research Centre (APHRC), which has spearheaded significant ongoing research in the settlements of Korogocho and Viwandani.

17 KNBS (2020a).

18 Kimani et al. (2021).

19 Cheeseman, Kanyinga, and Lynch (2020).

20 Kagwanja (2009); Klopp (2000).

21 Ibid.

22 Mutahi and Ruteere (2019); Schuberth (2018).

23 Tyce (2020).

24 Manji (2020); Bassett (2020).

25 Jones (2020); Owuor and Mbatia (2012).

26 Jones (2020).

27 Baraka (2020).

28 KNBS (2020b).

were chronically poor.²⁹ Food insecurity in Nairobi is widespread and linked to poverty as well as gendered disadvantage. In a citywide survey of over 1,400 households, 58% of households experienced moderate or severe food insecurity, with low-income and female-headed households recording elevated levels of food insecurity.³⁰

Economic downturns linked to Covid-19 have exacerbated poverty and food insecurity, especially among informal labourers unable to work.³¹ Based on surveys in May 2020 of over 200 residents in five informal settlements, 74% skipped meals or ate less because they could not afford food.³² At the same time, Covid-19 spurred the expansion of the Kenyan government's initiative known as 'Kazi Mtaani'³³ to support youth livelihoods (especially community clean-ups and other hygiene activities) in informal settlements. The government has also provided emergency cash transfers,³⁴ while the Give Directly initiative and Innovations for Poverty Action similarly provided cash transfers in some of Nairobi's informal settlements. However, recent research suggests that the government's cash transfers programme during Covid-19 reached just 29,000 residents in Nairobi's informal settlements (from April to November 2020). Key challenges included a lack of clarity on eligibility criteria, cronyism and corruption in distribution, and inadequate levels of support for the few residents who received cash transfers.³⁵

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS

Residents of Nairobi's informal settlements often face multiple threats simultaneously, due to overlapping environmental health hazards as well as violence, maternal health risks and non-communicable disease. Climate change models indicate that by 2040, Nairobi's daily maximum temperatures will increase by between 0.5 and 2°C, with uncertain projections regarding rainfall.³⁶ Nairobi's informal settlements already experience higher temperatures, largely as a result of scarce vegetation, limited reflectivity and extremely dense structures.³⁷ Informal settlements such as Kibera and Mukuru are also at heightened risk of flooding, due to poor drainage, inadequate solid waste management and their location in the riparian reserves.³⁸

Research by African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) found that childhood mortality rates in Nairobi's informal settlements fell from 2000 to 2012, but slums' under-five mortality rate in 2012 still exceeded the city's overall rate in 2008-09 (79.8 per 1,000 vs. 63.4 per 1,000).³⁹ As seen below, adult mortality patterns in Nairobi's informal settlements are strongly gendered (Figure 2). Injury deaths are far more common among men than women (31% vs. 7.2%), with men being much more likely to die of assault, and women are more than twice as likely to die of HIV/AIDS. Other leading causes of adult mortality include tuberculosis, cardiovascular disease and obstetric causes.

29 Wamukoya et al. (2020).

30 Owuor (2018).

31 Kimari (2020).

32 Quaife et al. (2020).

33 See <https://housingandurban.go.ke/national-hygiene-programme-kazi-mtaani/>

34 Kimani et al. (2021).

35 Human Rights Watch (2021).

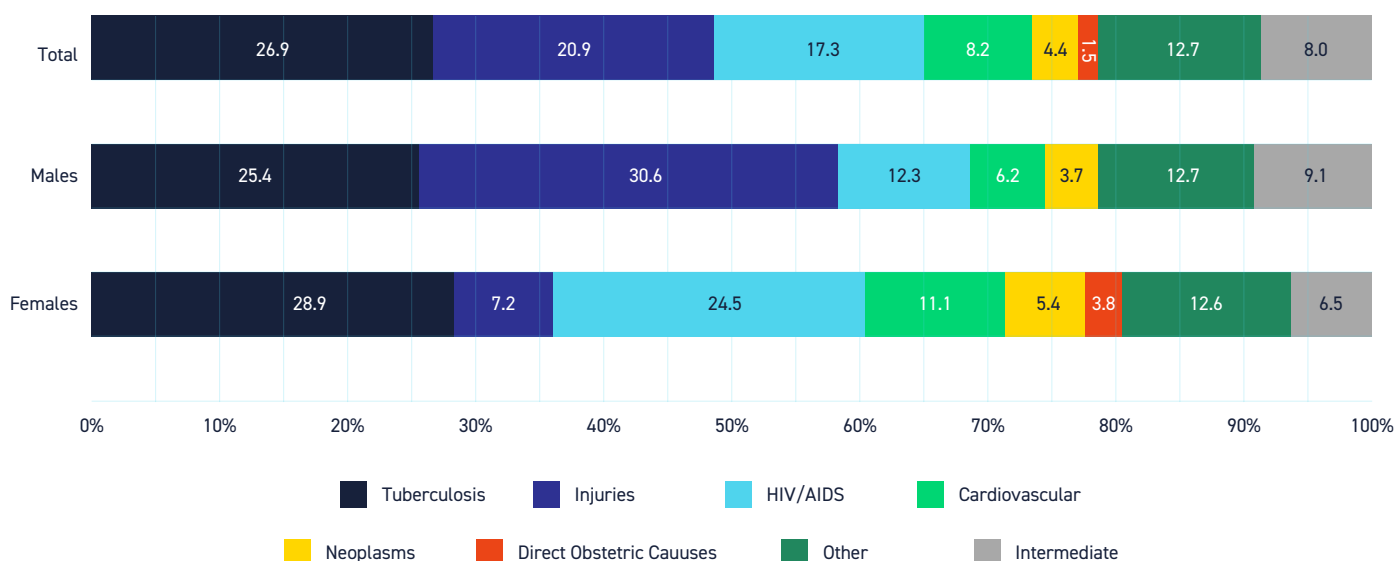
36 University of Cape Town et al. (2017).

37 Scott et al. (2017).

38 Mitra et al. (2017).

39 African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) (2014).

Figure 2: Gender, age, and adult mortality in Korogocho and Viwandani informal settlements from 2003 to 2012 (N=2,464 residents aged 15 and above)



Source: Mberu et al. (2015).

LAND, HOUSING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Nairobi's ongoing sprawl and highway construction contributes to rising levels of air pollution, forced evictions and declining green spaces (especially in informal settlements).⁴⁰ The informal rental market predominates in Nairobi's (often low-quality) housing provision, which is strongly shaped by corrupt local and national governance, dysfunctional planning systems and land mismanagement. About 34% of Nairobi's residents rent single rooms in informal settlements (typically iron sheets and/or mud), while 36% live in single rooms in five- to ten-storey tenements built of stone and concrete.⁴¹ Significant challenges in housing delivery include siloed local departments, limited technical capacity alongside excessive bureaucracy, shortfalls in affordable housing finance and lack of political commitment to serving the poor.⁴² Nairobi has a lengthy history of politicised land deals, failure to deliver land for public housing and irregular land allocations that have often marginalised low-income residents.⁴³ Meanwhile, land records are still being digitised and are rarely updated. Nairobi's property tax base remains narrow and vulnerable to political manipulation.⁴⁴

Although infrastructure delivery varies widely across Nairobi, low-income residents often rely on informal providers that may offer insecure, poorly maintained or low-quality services at a premium. In 2019, Nairobi's sewerage coverage was 51% and water coverage reached 77% of households, but offered only six hours of supply daily.⁴⁵ Despite promising efforts to enhance water, sanitation and hygiene in Nairobi's informal settlements (for example, automated water dispensing units), many low-income residents continue to use shared, poorly maintained provision, including public water-taps, pay-per-use public toilets, and pit latrines.⁴⁶ Lengthy queues at public taps and toilets can impose gender-inequitable time burdens, as well as heightened risks of sexual violence, especially at night in Nairobi's insecure informal settlements.⁴⁷ Studies in informal settlements have also uncovered a "poverty penalty" and a rent premium, with residents paying more for lower-quality shelter and infrastructure than their counterparts

40 Manji (2015); Scott et al. (2017).

41 Mwau and Sverdlík (2020).

42 Ibid: 28.

43 Klopp and Lumumba (2017).

44 Nyabwengi and K'Akumu (2019); Nyabwengi (2020).

45 WASREB (2020).

46 Mwau, Sverdlík and Makau (2020).

47 Winter et al. (2019).

in formal housing.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, young people are often engaged in a creative “hustle” of managing solid waste disposal in informal settlements.⁴⁹ In some of Nairobi’s large dumpsites, access to waste can become a source of conflict between gangs.⁵⁰

Regarding Nairobi’s transport, over 40% of all trips are via paratransit (typically minibuses called matatu), and another 40% via walking. Private automobiles account for just 13.5%, yet “transportation planning in Nairobi continues to be skewed [in favour of] wealthier car users”.⁵¹ The politics of provision and relations between formal and informal infrastructure providers can differ by sector as well as informal settlement.⁵² For instance, matatu drivers may collude with police and politicians, while also periodically hiking fares and clashing with one another.⁵³ The Mungiki gang has dominated some matatu routes, in addition to controlling water-taps and electricity in Mathare.⁵⁴

SAFETY AND SECURITY

Nairobi’s insecurities are often related to control of land, elections, state repression and extrajudicial killings, and terrorism/radicalisation.⁵⁵ In areas with disputed land ownership, gangs often collect “protection fees” from housing developers. Gangs are also influential actors in land markets, especially in areas with illegal land invasions and subdivisions.⁵⁶ The risk of ethnic-inflected violence is a major concern around elections – including via militias manipulated by key politicians – and such hostilities have occurred in some of Nairobi’s informal settlements.⁵⁷ Young men in informal settlements often bear the brunt of police brutality and there has been a marked increase in police killings since the onset of the pandemic.⁵⁸

Nairobi is also home to at least 80,000 refugees, largely from Somalia, South Sudan, DRC and Ethiopia.⁵⁹ While many of Nairobi’s refugees face precarious livelihoods, alongside linguistic and other barriers to shelter or services, Somali refugees are often particularly at risk of police harassment and discrimination.⁶⁰

THE BUILDING BRIDGES INITIATIVE, SUCCESSION, AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Kenya faces substantial difficulties in fulfilling its constitutional promises to promote democracy and rule of law, with further concerns linked to the 2022 elections and ongoing court battles. Since the disputed 2017 presidential elections, the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) has sought to change political structures by creating a prime ministerial position and independent judiciary ombudsman, alongside other steps to address divisive elections and promote national unity.⁶¹ But such reforms remain controversial, with some analysts and high-profile activists instead prioritising the implementation of existing laws.⁶² On 13 May 2021, Kenya’s High Court struck down the BBI initiative, finding the entire process irregular and unconstitutional, which has starkly threatened Uhuru’s legacy and succession plans.⁶³ Following the Court of Appeal’s subsequent ruling on 20 August 2021 that upheld the High Court’s decision, the case will go to the Supreme Court and may markedly shape preparations for upcoming Presidential elections.⁶⁴ Uhuru’s second term will expire in August 2022, and Kenya’s political settlement might be destabilised by rivalries between various presidential contenders (including William Ruto, Raila Odinga, current governors and ex-vice presidents).⁶⁵ Although Nairobi Metropolitan Services’ term is meant to expire in March 2022,

48 Akiba Mashinani Trust with University of Nairobi, Strathmore University and Katiba Institute (2015); Talukdar (2018).

49 Thieme (2013).

50 Muindi et al. (2020).

51 Campbell et al. (2019). Also note: Nairobi’s Non-Motorised Transport (NMT) policy does commit to devoting 20% of the road budget to investments in cycling and walking (Nairobi City County (2015).

52 Post, Bronsoler and Salman (2017).

53 Klopp (2012); Rasmussen (2012).

54 Ibid.

55 Elfverson and Höglund (2019).

56 Mwau, Sverdlik and Makau (2020).

57 Schubert (2018).

58 Kimari, W. (2020); Van Stapele (2016).

59 In January 2021, over 81,000 refugees had registered in Nairobi (UNHCR, 2021) but many others are unregistered.

60 Muindi and Mberu (2019); Balakian (2016).

61 Kiruga (2020).

62 Cottrell Ghai (2020); Onguny (2020).

63 Mutua (2021); Ghai and Ghai (2021); Wanyoike (2021).

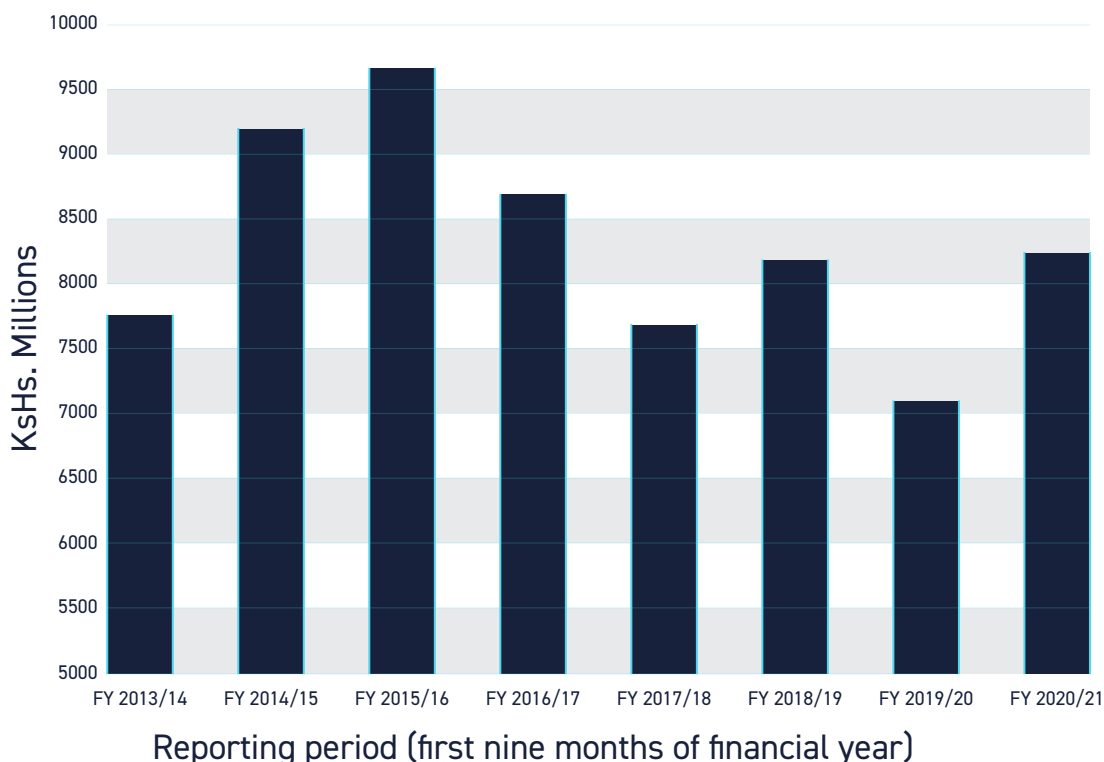
64 Wangui (2021).

65 Galvin and Mutie (2021).

its future is uncertain and Nairobi’s gubernatorial elections may be affected by presidential power struggles.⁶⁶

Additionally, the 2010 Constitution outlawed gender discrimination, but there are significant gaps between the Constitution and inequitable realities facing Kenyan women.⁶⁷ In September 2020, then-Chief Justice, David Maranga, advised President Kenyatta to dissolve parliament for its failure to fulfil the Constitution’s two-thirds gender principle (meaning no more than two out of three parliamentarians should be of the same gender), as only 21% of MPs are currently female.⁶⁸ BBI has promised to redress gendered imbalances in parliament,⁶⁹ but it remains unclear if this solution will be adequate or taken forward.

Figure 3: Nairobi city county’s own-source revenues (2014-2020, Ksh. Billions)



Source: OCOB 2021 with data from Nairobi city county treasury.

DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Realising the democratic possibilities of devolved government is an especially daunting challenge in Nairobi. The constitution ushered in significant reforms to promote an independent judiciary and to devolve powers as well as resources to 47 county governments, thus generating a “more dynamic, competitive and democratic political system”.⁷⁰ Devolution has helped attenuate Kenya’s prior “winner-takes-all” politics that had previously fostered violence.⁷¹ But ensuring devolution’s accountable, responsive and inclusive potential is particularly challenging in Nairobi, where the Nairobi Metropolitan Service has recently utilised top-down strategies and is dominated by military officers.⁷² Kenya’s “competitive devolution” has led to ongoing power struggles between national and county governments: in Nairobi, the NMS has performed county functions since 2020 while eroding the county government’s

66 Kinyanjui (2021).]

67 Kameri-Mbote (2018); Mitullah (2020).

68 Makokha (2020).

69 “Part of the changes to legislature [under BBI] also include an affirmative action formula meant to solve the ‘two-thirds’ gender rule embedded in the 2010 constitution” (Kiruga 2020).

70 Cheeseman et al. (2019).

71 Mutahi and Ruteere (2019).

72 Warah (2020).

bureaucratic and political powers.⁷³

There are further concerns about the reinvigoration of patronage networks at the local level and continuation of predatory political practices.⁷⁴ Although the Kenyan government has devolved approximately 25% of national revenue, patronage networks are only being “rerouted” rather than eliminated.⁷⁵ Data from Nairobi county’s latest budget review and the Office of the Controller of Budget suggest that development spending has been sidelined in favour of officials’ personal gain, and the county’s own-source revenues had fallen significantly, even before Covid-19 (Figure 5). In 2020/21, Nairobi county’s development expenditure was just Ksh. 79m, a marked decline of 94% since the past year and a mere 0.8% of its annual development budget.⁷⁶ The county’s own-source revenue collection did rise to Ksh. 8.21bn, but represented less than 50% of the county’s annual target. Surprisingly, the county still spent Ksh. 297.97m on local travel, which “points to wasteful spending” during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, Nairobi has considerably improved its e-governance, including an online payment system for several services and plans to enhance its traffic management, GIS and other digital services.

INFORMAL SETTLEMENT UPGRADING AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

There are key opportunities to upgrade informal settlements and enhance low-cost housing provision. As part of the ‘Big 4’ Agenda, President Kenyatta pledged to build 500,000 affordable homes (from 2017 to 2022), and the affordable housing programme includes provision for households with annual earnings below Ksh. 50,000. However, such plans have been criticised for prioritising market-based approaches over support for upgrading or affordable rental housing, and it is still unclear how low-income households will be reached.⁷⁷ There are also (fairly small-scale) redevelopment projects: Nairobi annually needs 100,000 units of housing, but the county’s current plans to redevelop seven older housing estates will only provide 10,000 units.⁷⁸

Nairobi is the site of multiple upgrading initiatives, such as the World Bank’s newly launched \$150m second phase of the Kenya Informal Settlements Improvement Project (KISIP2) and the pioneering Special Planning Area (SPA) in Mukuru. The Mukuru SPA is rooted in years of advocacy and action research by Muungano wa Wanavijiji (Kenya’s urban poor federation), its technical support organisation, SDI-Kenya, and financial facility, Akiba Mashinani Trust (together “the Muungano Alliance”), alongside other civil society and academic partners.⁷⁹ Thanks to robust community participation and eight interdisciplinary planning consortia (with government support), the SPA has generated equitable, multisectoral and scaled-up interventions with only minimal displacement.⁸⁰ The inclusive SPA model will likely be replicated in Nairobi’s other informal settlements.

AFRICAN CITIES RESEARCH CONSORTIUM: POTENTIAL ADDED VALUE

The confluence of strong grassroots, civil society and research networks – as well as the progressive constitutional entry points and recent upgrading initiatives – offers possibilities for impactful action research. Key consortium partners for ACRC in Nairobi include the Muungano Alliance, who are members of Slum Dwellers International (SDI), and the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR). These partners have well-established links with an array of local policymakers, international agencies and practitioners in Nairobi. There are already valuable opportunities for emerging reform coalitions, as exemplified by the Mukuru SPA. Thus, ACRC is well-placed to analyse intricate power dynamics and outcomes of changing local/national political settlements (with attention to the unfolding trajectories of Nairobi Metropolitan Services and devolution reforms); explore emerging opportunities for democratic deepening; and identify ways to foster more equitable urbanisation pathways.

73 Opalo (2020).

74 Ghai (2020).

75 D’Arcy (2020).

76 Office of the Controller of Budget (2021), pages 233-240.

77 Omenya (2018).

78 Nairobi City County (2020).

79 Makau and Weru (2018).

80 Horn et al. (2020); Horn (2021); Sverdlik et al. (2020).

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