Nairobi: City research brief

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The African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) is a collaborative research programme, seeking to tackle complex urban development challenges in the continent's rapidly changing cities. ACRC aims to generate robust insights and evidence that will help improve the living conditions and urban services for all city residents, especially disadvantaged communities.

ACRC's research integrates political settlements thinking with city systems analysis, to understand the dynamics underpinning infrastructure and service challenges in cities. Targeted analysis of specific urban development domains provides deeper insights into how sectoral shortcomings can be overcome and residents' needs addressed.

Nairobi is one of 12 African cities in which ACRC is engaging community organisations, researchers, practitioners, key state actors and non-state agencies, to co-produce knowledge and evidence to advance urban transformation.

As Kenya's economic and political capital, Nairobi has played a pivotal role in development across several scales. From 2013-2020, Nairobi contributed nearly 28% of the national economy's total Gross Value Added; the adjoining Kiambu County contributed another 6% (KNBS 2022). The city is a major hub for trade and business networks, both in Kenya and East Africa more generally. Nairobi is thus an undisputed powerhouse, and its growth has significant influence in Kenya and the region more generally.

Research highlights

> Nairobi's major challenges include inadequate services and infrastructure networks; limited state accountability and responsiveness to citizens; and disjointed, exclusionary city planning efforts.

> Nairobi is also distinguished by its array of informal enterprises and vibrant civil society networks, who offer essential contributions and can help generate equitable, co-produced interventions with official stakeholders.

We recommend the following interventions:

1. Enhance informal enterprises' productivity, including via access to infrastructure, technology, and information.

2. Develop rental housing policies for Nairobi, which can encourage area-based housing programmes and support for affordable rental markets.

3. Understand the costs of punitive security, while also generating more inclusive strategies in informal neighbourhoods.

4. Strengthen the provision of school feeding programmes to enhance the health, nutrition and wellbeing of children in informal settlements.

Research summaries

Political settlement

Kenya's political settlement is characterised by shifting ethnic alliances, crony capitalism and competitive elections. This national-level settlement significantly influences the governance and everyday politics of Nairobi. Politics in Kenya is strongly shaped by informal norms in state operations, and ethnic-based patronage is commonplace. Despite high levels of elite cohesion, political alliances in Kenya are also highly dynamic and elite pacts are frequently remade.

Nairobi's political leadership has often echoed the national government's challenges, including limited accountability and widespread use of patronage. This hampers the delivery of critical services and infrastructure, especially in Nairobi's informal settlements. Nairobi holds a pivotal position in Kenya's national politics and economy, serving as a major hub for trade and business networks, which the elite regularly utilise to generate rents. More positively, devolution in Kenya has provided an opportunity for citizens to shape Nairobi's governance and an incentive for elected leaders to be more responsive to their needs.

City of systems

Nairobi's infrastructure and services are fragmented. There are a range of private actors and competing local and international agencies. Last-mile connectivity is a key concern, especially in underserved peripheral areas and informal settlements unserved by formal systems. Multiple informal providers offer low-quality services including in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), solid waste management and transport systems. Cartels – large-scale informal providers who establish local monopolies – typically offer costly, hazardous provision, particularly in informal settlements. These groups often benefit from politicians' protection or collude with Nairobi's official service providers.

There are also widening gaps between supply and demand, as Nairobi's population growth and spatial expansion continue apace. The lack of integrated, forward-looking planning – especially for land-use, housing and infrastructure – substantially limits Nairobi's potential for economic development and climate resilience. Shortfalls in these systems also contribute to ill-health, inadequate shelter and insecurity, while more coordinated, joined-up strategies may provide multiple benefits for inclusive urban development.

Domains

> Structural transformation

Nairobi has undergone rapid urbanisation, but with limited movement of workers from lower to higher productivity sectors – known as structural transformation (ST). Much of Nairobi's labour force remains in informal jobs that use less productive techniques and employ low-wage workers. More positively, the business climate has improved recently, partly thanks to Kenya's devolution reforms:

> *"We've witnessed growth in terms of our global competitiveness index [and] increased FDI [foreign direct investment]...The devolved structure of government means more alignment and transparency, and this means more citizen participation in public projects"*
> – Focus group discussion participant

However, ST in Nairobi is hindered by political and economic factors. Key constraints to ST are:

1. High cost of doing business
2. Large informal economic base
3. Far-reaching influence of cartels in business operations
4. Rent-seeking by the political class, which results in power contestations between national and county governments

Cartels are a central part of the business environment – some of them very powerful and working with influential political actors as their agents. There are also problems with complex bureaucracy and regulation/licensing problems, corruption (informal payments) and inadequate government services.

Potential structural transformation interventions

We recommend creating mechanisms to identify informal enterprises in Nairobi and devising ways to improve their growth potential. Formalisation may be a long-term objective, but in the short- to medium-term, new ways to boost informal enterprises' productivity are needed. This could include **investing in basic infrastructure, digital technology, financial inclusion and skills upgrading**. While it is difficult to reduce the influence of cartels, key strategies may include **automated government service provision** and reducing the search costs (between buyers and sellers) by **increasing access to information on digital platforms** – thereby diminishing cartels' involvement in business. This can also help to reduce the rent-seeking opportunities for bureaucrats.

> Housing

Nairobi has a wide range of shelter typologies, which encompass both formal and informal settlements as well as hybrid types of housing. There are stark differences in the quality of shelter, access to infrastructure and densities of Nairobi's settlements. For instance, Kibera is 163 times more densely populated than Karen and 81 times more densely populated than Langata (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Density (persons per sq km)
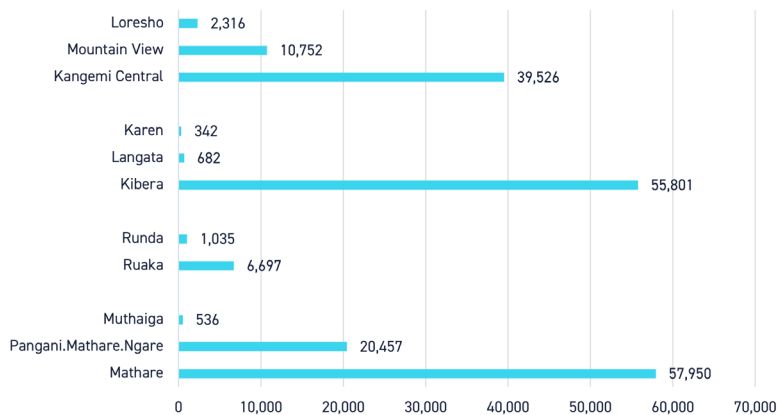
Source: KNBS (2019)

Over 90% of Nairobi residents are tenants (KNBS 2019), but rental housing has consistently been neglected in Nairobi's housing policy and practice. Even in Nairobi's high-income areas, over 2 in 3 households are tenants. In low and middle-income areas, well over 90% of residents are tenants. There is an urgent need to bring rental housing to the forefront of Nairobi's housing and urban development agendas.

Potential housing interventions

Two key reform gaps have hampered efforts to address reforms in Nairobi's housing needs. First, the city's unacknowledged high incidence of rental occupancy, which has led to the omission of rental housing from the housing agenda. Second, the lack of clearly articulated functional assignments and decisionmaking roles in urban housing decision spaces, given the diverse range of public and private stakeholders in housing.

In response, we recommend **the development of a Nairobi Metropolitan Housing Policy** that includes area-based housing programmes and offers interventions in private rental markets. **The Kenya National Housing Policy should be revised** to help manage a wide array of urban housing typologies, support rural–urban linkages, and enhance delivery of related infrastructure and services. Additionally, **we recommend the establishment of housing

research labs and boundary organisations** to help generate information architecture on Nairobi's housing and offer technical support to the national and county governments.

> Safety and security

Everyday safety and security are connected to broader political-economic processes and structures across spatial scales. Many of Kenya's security institutions have long histories inextricably connected to colonial and/or postcolonial structures of violence. It is also essential to understand the situated and embodied experiences of safety and the everyday struggles through which Nairobi residents actually produce their modalities of security – or, more simply, how people keep each other safe:

> *"Security means the ability to live in an area inhabited with different people without fear of ill-treatment or interference of any rights and freedoms. As an activist, this is achieved by people's understanding of my work, alongside support from various [local] organisations"*
> – Anthony, Mathare activist

Kenya's formal organs of security have, at best, often neglected their role of protecting and providing security to the majority of Nairobi residents and, at worst, frequently compound the problem of insecurity. In turn, this lack of substantive safety leads many people to find their own forms of security via practices including reciprocity, solidarity and friendship that are predominantly not institutionalised. Our analysis shows that rather than providing meaningful security for most Nairobians, the police often exacerbate insecurity. As such, there is a need to support existing practices and organisations wherein solidaristic and non-punitive forms of safety and security are already being practised and produced by everyday urban residents.

Potential safety and security interventions

Our potentially strategic interventions seek to enhance safety and security for marginalised residents by intervening in the built environment and producing evidence that can support the advocacy actions of diverse civil society organisations. First, **we recommend child-centred and environmentally designed play spaces in low-income neighbourhoods**. This will improve the safety and security of children and young people who lack safe play areas and, as a result, face dangers from speeding motor transport when they play on roads and other interstitial places that do not serve their recreational purposes.

Second, **we propose to document the costs of petty offences upon vulnerable communities and to showcase alternative and non-punitive approaches to local security provision**. This initiative's purpose is to reveal the broad and cascading effects from the widespread criminalisation of low-income residents in Nairobi – mainly its youth. We recommend a handbook as a way to disseminate information on the ongoing and normalised harassment, extortion and physical violence on this population by formal security forces; comprehensively tally the costs of this impunity; and explore different approaches that can catalyse more just, people-centred security in Nairobi and Kenya more generally.

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> Health, wellbeing and nutrition

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Much of Nairobi's population lives in informal settlements with high levels of poverty and food insecurity, poor health and nutrition, and inadequate access to quality public healthcare. Food insecurity has deteriorated recently because of the rising food and energy prices, with households opting not to cook due to increased costs.

Children in informal settlements typically have extremely high prevalence of stunting, wasting, underweight and micronutrient deficiencies, which are stark manifestations of poor health and nutrition (Figure 2). Such nutrition-related outcomes of unhealthy diets can significantly impair children's intellectual and physical development, with negative long-term impacts upon their wellbeing and socioeconomic progress more broadly. There is a pressing need for increased access to, and uptake of, healthy diets among children in informal settlements.

More positively, schools are important avenues of promoting healthy diets in informal settlements. The current school feeding programmes reach only public primary schools, yet the majority of schools in informal settlements are informal. Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres also provide an opportunity to address malnutrition from a young age.

Figure 2: Malnutrition outcomes among children in urban areas by residence
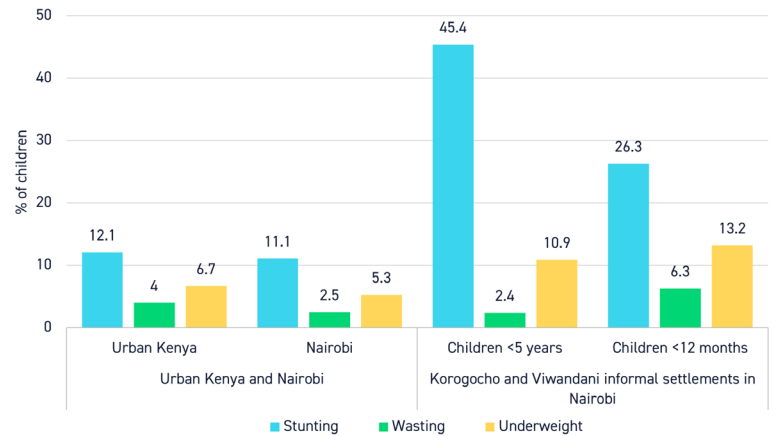
Sources: KDHS (2022), Kimani-Murage et al. (2015), De Vita et al. (2019)

Potential health, wellbeing and nutrition interventions

The intervention's objective is to **shift from merely "provision of food" to "provision of sustainable and affordable healthy diets"**, to achieve lasting gains in children's health and nutrition in informal settlements. This can be realised via **advocacy, training, capacity building and mainstreaming of sustainable and affordable healthy diets in school feeding programmes, school farming, and community-based informal day-care centres**.

Nairobi City County's proposed programme of providing free lunch to all primary school-going children is an important step in the right direction. We propose to strengthen this by:

1. **Ensuring the response is multisectoral** with stakeholders from various departments – eg health and nutrition, agriculture, water and local administration.
2. **Being guided by community needs**, especially in informal settlements – communities have the solutions to make this programme equitable and sustainable.
3. **Collaborating with other relevant stakeholders** – eg civil society groups, NGOs, academia, donors, development partners and private sector.

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