

UN-HABITAT

THE CHALLENGE OF SLUMS



City of Mercy:

New Homes Offer Some Slum-Dwellers Hope

On a muddy, rutted road just off Nairobi's main motorway, young women are crocheting behind small stacks of vegetables. The vegetables lie on thin pieces of cloth set on the ground to separate them from the rubbish that carpets the land where the women are standing. This is the main entrance to Huruma, one of many cramped slums in a city where sixty per cent of the population lives on less than 5 per cent of the land.

To a newcomer's eye, it would seem that all of Huruma – which is Kiswahili for mercy - sits on a rubbish dump. But as there is no rubbish collection in the slums, this is not technically a dump. This is the landscape. Between the waste and filthy plastic and sludge, barefoot children play, chickens pick at bits of fetid food, goats root for scraps, and the occasional dog relieves itself.

These women have a good location for selling vegetables. When you're tired and on your way home to the slum, they are the first people you meet. They do enough business to get by. Plenty of others don't. In Huruma, a hodgepodge of six villages along a river bank just 10 minutes by car from some of Nairobi's affluent enclaves, people live crowded 1,800 to the hectare, and many go hungry.

On a large stack of concrete blocks further into the slum, a group of 10 or so women are waiting. They sit on jagged, dusty cinder blocks, which are waiting to be used in 19 new residences being built by donors to the Pamoja Trust, an NGO that works with slum dwellers. The Trust is one of hundreds of global partners of UN-HABITAT, whose new book, *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003* examines the implications of spiralling slum populations around the world.

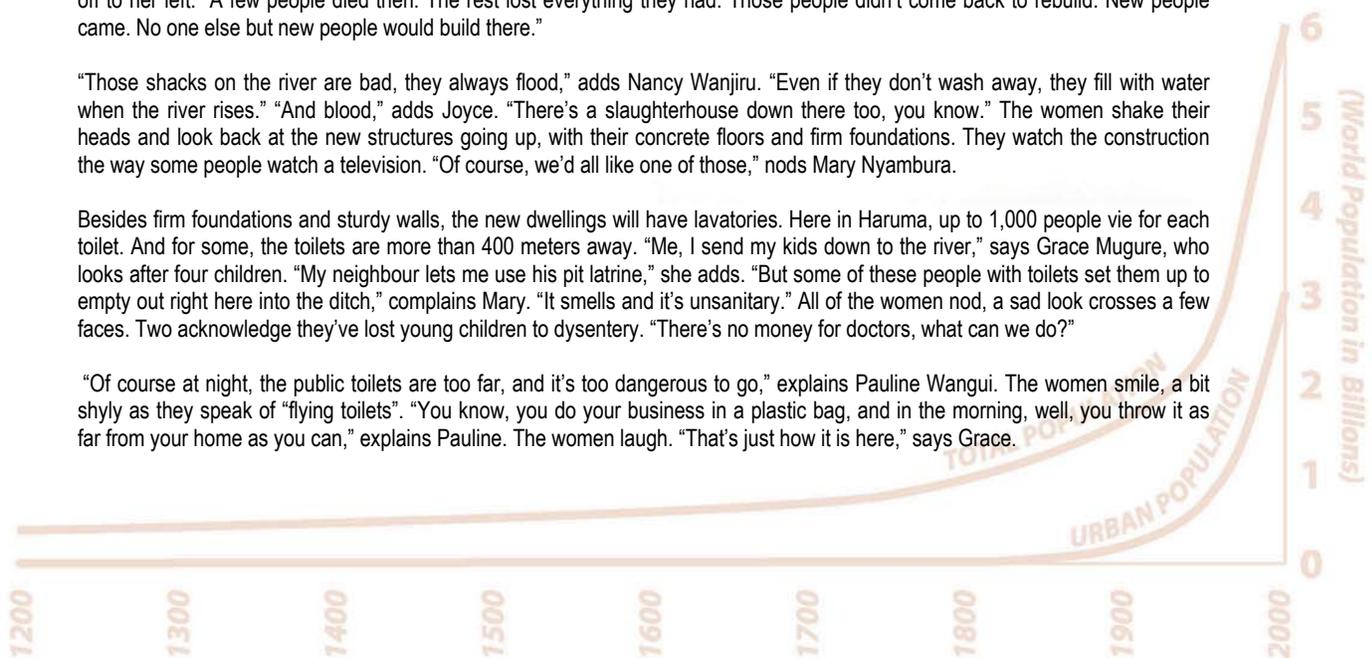
"These new homes going up in Huruma are an excellent example of how we can work with our partners to create inclusive cities," says Mrs. Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, Executive Director of UN-HABITAT. "We need such partnerships all over the world to build the foundations, not just of homes, but communities."

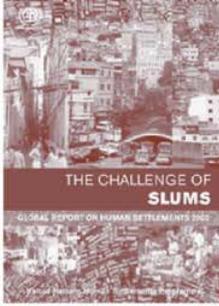
The new homes under construction are of great interest to many residents here. In this high-density slum of 8- by 9-foot shacks – structures are made of mud, polythene sheets, metal pounded to make doors, anything at all sturdy to shut out intruders, to separate you from your neighbour, so that you can have a small sliver of privacy. The roofs of these shacks are made from corrugated tin sheeting with holes rusted through, that leak in the rainy season onto the mud floors which loosen and flow back into the river that borders the slum. "Last year all the homes on that river bank were washed away," says Joyce Wambui, pointing off to her left. "A few people died then. The rest lost everything they had. Those people didn't come back to rebuild. New people came. No one else but new people would build there."

"Those shacks on the river are bad, they always flood," adds Nancy Wanjiru. "Even if they don't wash away, they fill with water when the river rises." "And blood," adds Joyce. "There's a slaughterhouse down there too, you know." The women shake their heads and look back at the new structures going up, with their concrete floors and firm foundations. They watch the construction the way some people watch a television. "Of course, we'd all like one of those," nods Mary Nyambura.

Besides firm foundations and sturdy walls, the new dwellings will have lavatories. Here in Haruma, up to 1,000 people vie for each toilet. And for some, the toilets are more than 400 meters away. "Me, I send my kids down to the river," says Grace Mugure, who looks after four children. "My neighbour lets me use his pit latrine," she adds. "But some of these people with toilets set them up to empty out right here into the ditch," complains Mary. "It smells and it's unsanitary." All of the women nod, a sad look crosses a few faces. Two acknowledge they've lost young children to dysentery. "There's no money for doctors, what can we do?"

"Of course at night, the public toilets are too far, and it's too dangerous to go," explains Pauline Wangui. The women smile, a bit shyly as they speak of "flying toilets". "You know, you do your business in a plastic bag, and in the morning, well, you throw it as far from your home as you can," explains Pauline. The women laugh. "That's just how it is here," says Grace.





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Grace is over 70. She has four kids to feed, waiting for her in her tiny room. Mary is 60 and she has four. Teresia Wambui is 57 and tends to six. They all look too old to have so many kids still living at home. But like many in Sub-Saharan Africa, the children, and their grandparents, are the survivors of the lost generation - the generation in between - the ones who died of AIDs and left their parents with grandchildren to start raising all over again. "I didn't think I'd be feeding so many at my age," says Teresia, who sells vegetables from a stall in the city centre. "We've got no land, no money, there's no one but us to care for them." But what often stands between these women and earning a little money is crime. "Some days, I have to shut my stall down. There are so many criminals, I cannot do business. Customers can't get to my stall. I make no money."

Crime, especially violent crime, is the biggest worry these women have. Police don't enter the slums, and in Huruma, crime, according to the residents, is rampant. For most, venturing out after dark is unthinkable. Often their only line of defence is their children. "You teach them to keep away from the bad ones," explains Mary. "You tell them 'Don't give me a bad name'. You know, most of the criminals here, their parents are members of the community, so there is no way we can get rid of them," she adds.

"We have all been stolen from countless times," adds Nancy. "A padlock is of no use. Crime is a constant thing here. The only people out on the street after 10, other than the criminals, are the men who go to drink Chang'aa." Chang'aa can be a poor man's downfall in the slum. A spirit distilled from maize or sorghum, it can resemble vodka when made well. When it's mixed with methanol, which it often is, it gives a greater kick, and can kill - as it did 100 people in Nairobi in 2001. "Men drink up their salaries, and then they get mugged for the rest," says Nancy. "Criminals don't have to go far for an easy target."

Lawrence Wanjohi, a youngish man of 39, wanders by with James Gathiru, whose 56 years are evident on his face and Isaac Mberere a street hawker of 46. They too, talk about crime. "I finally gave up on selling kerosene from my storefront," says Lawrence, "After the third time I was robbed I just gave up." Lawrence's stall was in a bad location, on a dark road, far from the main corridors of the slum. "To protect yourself without a gun is hard," he says. "You can't do anything to protect yourself if they've got a pistol. Guns make the difference."

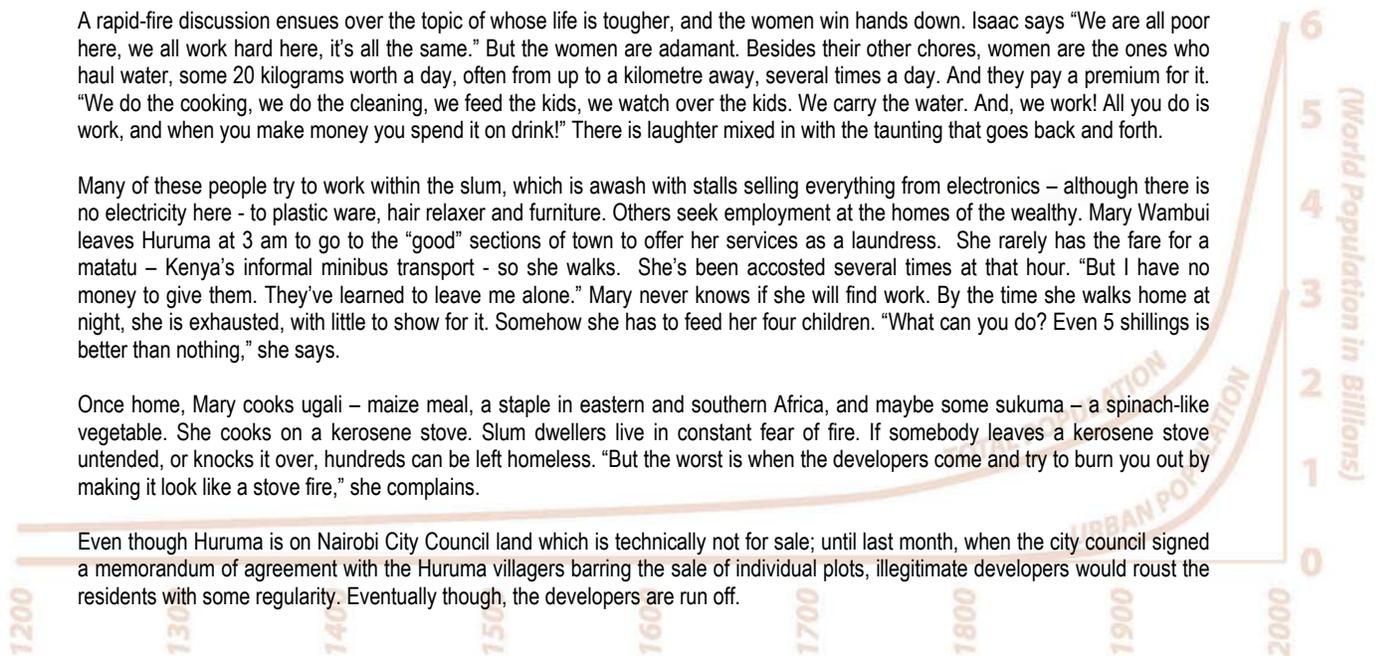
Lawrence now scratches out a living as a casual labourer, with a wife and three children to support. "Sure we go hungry," he says laughing. "Many, many times. Even the children have to go a few days hungry here and there." The women shake their heads in agreement. "And yes," he admits, aiming the words at the women, "sometimes we drink. Find me a slum without Bhang, (marijuana) or Chang'aa."

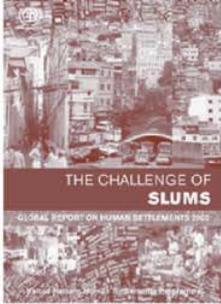
A rapid-fire discussion ensues over the topic of whose life is tougher, and the women win hands down. Isaac says "We are all poor here, we all work hard here, it's all the same." But the women are adamant. Besides their other chores, women are the ones who haul water, some 20 kilograms worth a day, often from up to a kilometre away, several times a day. And they pay a premium for it. "We do the cooking, we do the cleaning, we feed the kids, we watch over the kids. We carry the water. And, we work! All you do is work, and when you make money you spend it on drink!" There is laughter mixed in with the taunting that goes back and forth.

Many of these people try to work within the slum, which is awash with stalls selling everything from electronics - although there is no electricity here - to plastic ware, hair relaxer and furniture. Others seek employment at the homes of the wealthy. Mary Wambui leaves Huruma at 3 am to go to the "good" sections of town to offer her services as a laundress. She rarely has the fare for a matatu - Kenya's informal minibus transport - so she walks. She's been accosted several times at that hour. "But I have no money to give them. They've learned to leave me alone." Mary never knows if she will find work. By the time she walks home at night, she is exhausted, with little to show for it. Somehow she has to feed her four children. "What can you do? Even 5 shillings is better than nothing," she says.

Once home, Mary cooks ugali - maize meal, a staple in eastern and southern Africa, and maybe some sukuma - a spinach-like vegetable. She cooks on a kerosene stove. Slum dwellers live in constant fear of fire. If somebody leaves a kerosene stove unattended, or knocks it over, hundreds can be left homeless. "But the worst is when the developers come and try to burn you out by making it look like a stove fire," she complains.

Even though Huruma is on Nairobi City Council land which is technically not for sale; until last month, when the city council signed a memorandum of agreement with the Huruma villagers barring the sale of individual plots, illegitimate developers would roust the residents with some regularity. Eventually though, the developers are run off.





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"We help each other here," says Grace, who has lived in Huruma for more than 20 years. "You may get chased off for a day, but we are a close community. If a developer tries to run you off, some of the men hold him in place while a bunch of us go down to the city council. We get proof the plot isn't sold and come back and chase that man away." She laughs for the first time. "It's easy to run one person off their plot, but you can't run us all off."

Grace's eyes scan back to the new homes going up: homes that promise safety, sanitation, and some measure of freedom from fear. Jane Weru, Executive Director of Pamoja Trust, says with the help of the Ford Foundation and Homeless International, along with other donors, the Trust hopes to eventually help re-house 10,000 Huruma residents. At 200,000 shillings – about US\$2,700 – per shelter, this may take some time.

But the residents of Huruma are willing to wait. "Remember," says Grace "we all want to see the slum fixed up. This isn't the way we want to live."

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