

## Through their eyes and mouths: Inequality in access to food in urban poor settings, Nairobi, Kenya

### 1. Introduction

Although the right to food is provided for in the 2010 Kenyan Constitution, many Kenyans do not enjoy it as it is not actualized for them. In urban informal settlements, over 80% of households are food insecure<sup>i</sup>. This results in suboptimal infant and young child feeding practices and high levels of malnutrition among children. The prevalence of chronic malnutrition (stunting) among children under five years is close to 50%<sup>ii</sup>. This underscores the need to promote the right to food. Through a Fellowship from the Wellcome Trust, the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) is implementing the “Right to Food Project” over two years from January 2018 to December 2019. The core objective of the project is to stimulate dialogue on the nexus between the Right to Food as stipulated in the international legal framework and the Bill of Rights in the Kenyan Constitution, and the lived experiences with food insecurity among urban poor populations as evidenced by research, highlighting vulnerabilities of different categories of people. The project is being undertaken in Nairobi, targeting urban poor settings and uses innovative, public engagement approaches targeting communities and change agents including policy/decision/law makers.

### 2. Methodology

#### 2.1. Setting

The project was undertaken in a total of over 10 Nairobi slums including Kibera, Dandora, Mathare, Korogocho, Viwandani, Mukuru Kwa Ruben, Pumwani, Majengo, Mukuru Kwa Njenga, Soweto, Kayole. The slums are characterized by poor housing, lack of basic infrastructure, violence, insecurity, high unemployment rates.

#### 2.2. Engagement Approaches

The engagement activities took place between October and December 2018. This was done mainly through Community Organized Groups working in the respective slums. Approaches used included photovoice, digital story-telling, participatory video, focus group discussions, community dialogues, graffiti and wall murals.

##### 2.2.1. Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews

Five Focus Group Discussions (FGDS), each involving six to eight people were conducted with the community members. The FGD participants were drawn from the community members. These discussions were attended by adults, the youth (19-30 years), and older people (more than 60 years old). The members were purposively selected in order to get adequate representation from the communities selected. In addition, 11 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with community leaders (chiefs and ward administrators). These interviews not only helped to gauge the level of awareness regarding the right to food but also supplemented the photovoice sessions in listing the proposed recommendations towards improving the right to food situation in the various communities.

##### 2.2.2. Photovoice



A photovoice training session underway at Korogocho, by Mum Baby & Love. Photo credit MF/2018

Photovoice is an innovative participatory engagement method of facilitating community participation. The community generates photographic work that captures their lived experiences through their eyes. Since the community is actively involved in the process, there is more ownership and commitment. Various groups were engaged including mixed-gender youth; women; groups with both men and women; mixed groups for older persons (60 years and above); and mothers of special needs children. The group members used photos to document their lived experiences regarding food

security and nutrition in the community. The participants were trained on the use of cameras and the ethics of photography. They were then provided with digital cameras to take photos that visually represented their day to day experiences, their struggles in attaining the food basket for themselves, their children and their families. Group discussions were then held with the participants to discuss the issues represented in the photos taken, the technique SHOWeD<sup>1</sup> was used to guide the discussions which involved the participants identifying what they can see, how it relates to their lives and what can be done to improve the situation in the photos by various stakeholders.

### 2.2.3. Digital story- telling

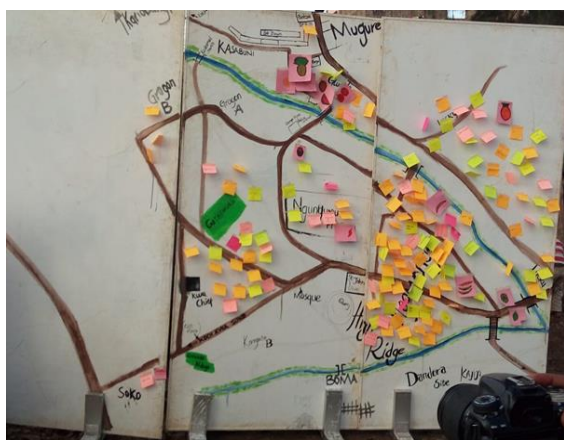
Digital storytelling is a short form of media production through the use of digital tools to tell the story in a compelling and emotionally engaging and interactive format. The digital stories produced combined still imagery, moving imagery, sound, and text, and was an interactive process that enhanced the experience, engagement and interactivity of the community members who created them. The method was used to learn, capture and share the struggles and lived experiences of community members with regards to food and nutrition security. The community members (youth and youth mothers) were trained on how to tell their stories and convert them into short video clips that can be shared.



Digital storytelling workshop session at Bega Kwa Bega, Korogocho. Photo credit: Hope Raisers/2018

### 2.2.4. Participatory Mapping

Participatory mapping, also known as participatory Geographic Information System (PGIS) involved identifying and mapping out food zones in the Korogocho slum, where food is found and people’s feelings on the quality of food. The team started by asking people on the streets about what they eat, where they eat, whether the food is healthy, and how accessible it is. This was a street activity where the crowd was entertained with music and contemporary dances. Participants were given sticker notes that they posted on a slum map. Over 200 participants were involved in the process.



Participants during the PGIS exercise in Korogocho. Photo credit: D. Osogo/2018



A food map of Korogocho area indicating the places where various food types are sold. Photo credit: D. Osogo/2018

<sup>1</sup> Photovoice uses a method called SHOWED which helps to describe your photographs, below are five questions related to SHOWED. 1. What do you See here? 2. What is really Happening here? 3. How does this relate to Our lives? 4. Why does this condition Exist? 5. What can we Do about it?

### 2.2.5. Community dialogues

Community members from various slums were engaged in discussions and explorations of their food security situation and the right to food. This took various forms, including the fish bowl approach, consultative plenary, the soup kitchen and *Vikao Vya Jamii*, and photovoice focus group discussions. In some, pictures showing lived experiences, skits and narratives were presented, highlighting various issues that sparked conversations around food security and right to food. Some of the sound-bites recorded were later aired on community radios for the consumption of the larger community and formed the basis of various debates on live radio shows.

## 3. Results

Data was analyzed using the food security framework. Data shows that the main concern with regards to food security in the urban poor settings is accessibility and food utilization. Data revealed inequality in economic access to food due to limited livelihoods in a context of limited employment and income generating activities. The food, often purchased from the streets is generally handled unhygienically due to poor water and environmental sanitation in these settings. Our results therefore focus on these aspects of food security, which depict inequality in access to quality food.

### 3.1. Food accessibility

The key finding under this pillar was that even though food was mostly available in the markets with plenty of quantity and variety, the market availability of food is not directly proportional to household availability of food as most households could not afford to buy the meals. Many only could only afford poor quality foods, while some are hungry. Views from the participants highlighted unemployment as a key driver of poor accessibility to food security. The youth and older people were particularly said to be at risk – for the youth due to unemployment and the older people due to the double burden of limited livelihoods and physical inaccessibility due to illness. Buying street foods (rather than preparing food at home) was a common coping strategy as streets foods are seen to be cheaper and convenient. Scavenging for food was also viewed as a coping strategy particularly for these groups.

The urban poor were also said to only be able to access sub-optimal food for example remnants of fish (bones) after fillet has been removed from the fish to be sold to the middle class and higher income groups. They often could not afford meat itself. These views are depicted below:



*“Vendors go to the market and bring these part of the fish, after the fillet has been removed, **the bones is what he brings**. They are dried in the open air on an old metallic bed. If you want to flavor your food and you cannot afford fish, this is what you buy and make soup to flavor your food. It is unhygienic and full of flies.”* -Photovoice, Adults, Nairobi Slums.

### **3.2. Food Utilization**

With regards to food utilization, food sanitation and hygiene due to very poor water and environmental sanitation condition was a major concern. Participants talked of food being grown with untreated sewage water. They also talked of unhygienic handling of food by street food vendors, while street food was a major source of food for the urban poor. Participants talked of frequent leakages of sewer lines & contamination of piped water used by the food vendors. Additionally, a considerable number of people were said to consume expired food and food from the dumpsite oblivious of the health effects. Further, lack of sufficient money to purchase quality food led to eating low quality and monotonous meals. Some of the experiences with food safety, hygiene and utilization are captured below:

### **4. Conclusions**

Findings from the project reveal inequality in access to food for the urban poor in Nairobi slums due to prevailing negative economic, physical, social and environmental context. The risk is heightened particularly, for youth and older people due to high levels of unemployment among the former, and the double burden of diminished livelihoods and physical capacity among the latter. Lived experiences include staying hungry due to lack of means to access food, opting for subs-standard and unhygienic foods often purchased from the streets or eating sewage grown food. These illuminate the fact that food availability in the market does not necessarily influence food accessibility. Coping strategies included innovative use of available resources such as in urban farming but also less favorable options such as scavenging from dumpsites, engaging in social ills, child labor, or resorting to begging etc. Together, these findings point to a direct linkage between a denial of the Right to Food, and larger societal problems such as economic inequality, and poor health, wellbeing and social outcomes. We urge researchers, and other relevant actors to frame the Right to Food using a lens that accurately reflects the lived experiences of those experiencing food insecurity, in order to identify and implement the most viable context specific solutions. To do so, further research must be repositioned to focus squarely on working with communities experiencing food insecurity as partners whose voices guide advocacy and stimulate dialogue on the Right to Food. The project also invites the need to carry out similar engagement approaches in rural areas to derive a better sense of the diversity in lived experiences between the two settings but also to establish linkages that can benefit both in actualizing the Right to Food

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<sup>i</sup> Kimani-Murage, E. *et al.* Vulnerability to food insecurity in urban slums: experiences from Nairobi, Kenya. *J. Urban Heal.* 91, 1098–1113 (2014).

<sup>ii</sup> Kimani-Murage, E. *et al.* Evidence of a Double Burden of Malnutrition in Urban Poor Settings in Nairobi, Kenya. *PLoS One* 10, (2015).