

# A Positive Vision of Kibera

Positive aspects of the biggest Nairobi's slum



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## Executive Summary

In May 2018, while we were in Nairobi, my son Enea visited Kibera, the biggest slum of Nairobi and Africa, actually, housing more than 300'000 people. He found the tour very informative and received a different perception of Kibera. He encouraged me to also visit it, with the assistance of Kibera Tours, a group of young and very professional residents of Kibera that organise tourist tours. I had taken a look at images of Kibera on the Internet and must admit that I wasn't really that interested, but then I came across a [report of The economist of 2012](#), that stated "Kibera may be the most entrepreneurial place on the planet".

I have dedicated my life to helping enterprising people succeed, so I decided to take the tour. Visiting Kibera has given me a different image and a positive feeling about people and their entrepreneurship. It has been an mind-blowing experience for me to witness such a pulsing local economy, made of thousands of small shops and other business-oriented activities. We also had a chance to meet and stay in contact with some interesting people.

What impressed me, was the huge difference between the information available online and Kibera's actual reality. Representations, made available via Google, focus mostly on the negative aspects. Visiting Kibera, I discovered so many encouraging things. I did a search on Internet about the positive aspects of slums, but I did not come across any document listing them. I had no prior knowledge of slums, as such. Despite this, I decided to put my impressions to word, considering my total lack of information as a plus, as it freed me from any prejudice. I started to organise and gather my thoughts in writing. What follows is a summary of positive aspects that I found in Kibera:

- **Kibera is a settlement of lower income people and not of poor people.** In Kibera, lower income individuals and families have access to many products and services that would not usually be available to them. It is the Kibera system that allows those low-income people to stay above the poverty line.
- **Kibera provides a home to many lower income people.** Having your own, "stable" roof, even a very modest one, is a distinguishing value. The situation of Kibera residents is substantially better than that of the homeless people living in many cities.
- **Kibera is a very efficient economy, focused on providing products and services to lower income people.** It is a very important part of the Nairobi's economy and also provides a lot of business opportunities to many individuals.
- **Kibera is a social reach environment** that offers a great deal of opportunities.
- **Kibera's informal settlement, made mostly of corrugated iron sheets, is fascinating.** It cannot be compared with any modern architecture but has a sort of artistic beauty, nevertheless.
- **Kibera is something that tourists ought to see.** In modern terminology, one could argue, that Kibera represents a "brand".

## Note from the author

This document is a personal exercise, focusing on providing evidence and structuring the positive aspects of Kibera, as perceived by the author and as a response to a mostly negative, misleading picture that are available online. This is a collection of thoughts of a person having almost no knowledge and visiting for the first time a Sub-Saharan African county and a slum. Please acknowledge the evident limits of this paper. The document is not even attempting to depict a

comprehensive picture of Kibera. It assumes that the reader has good knowledge of Kibera and their complex situations and problems. It will therefore stay focused on putting into evidence the positive aspects in a synthetic form.

The picture on the front page has been kindly provided by [Otieno Kennedy Rabala](#), artist from Massai Mbili Arts collective in Kibera.

## A positive Vision of Kibera

Images of Kibera that turn up on Google mostly show the worst aspects of the settlement. When reading information, viewing reports, speaking with people or visiting Kibera, undesirable aspects of slums are immediately made evident: poor housing, sanitary, lack of water, security and latrines. Research and studies also mostly focus on the problems and prospects for finding a solution. The situation of Kibera is usually compared to the districts of a “normal city”, that provides everything that is considered as basic infrastructure and services. The positive aspects of Kibera rarely emerge and remain mostly hidden.

It is not easy to move beyond the striking negative aspects. In order to notice the positive aspects of Kibera, you will have to take a different point of view, the one of people who do not have a home at all. In all major cities of the world, many people live without their own stable roof. It is estimated that in New York, around 60'000 people are homeless. If we compare that situation to the one of the Kibera residents, the advantages of their informal settlement start to become apparent. Living in Kibera is by an order magnitude better than the situation of homeless people. Just by having your own “stable” roof, even if very poor and limited, means a lot for those people. In Kibera individuals:

- Have their personal home.
- Are sheltered. They are not exposed to the full adversity of the weather (rain, cold, hot) and of the people (insecurity) that homeless people experience.
- Don't have to continuously search for a place where heat and sleep are available at night.
- Have their belongings and clothing protected. They can therefore dress and look like people living in more privileged housing.
- Can live together with a partner, have a family and raise children.
- Can have a stable job, organise themselves.

A slum is a large aggregation of people, that organises itself for community life. Even with the many problems that informal settlements have, the slum offers all the basic important elements of a social community:

- Social interactions with other humans.
- A more secure environment to live in, due to neighbourhood protection.
- Access to a series of important basic services (food, medicine, water, clothes, financial services, religious communities, phones) necessary for a life.
- Business opportunities, created by serving other people.
- Schooling and other chances for self-improvement.
- Transport services to easily reach other localities.

Kibera is within the Nairobi city borders. This means:

- Access to many services and opportunities, those that only a big city can offer (local and international transports, education, shopping, contacts with other people).
- Opportunities to find a job outside Kibera.

There are also many advantages for the economy of Nairobi:

- Kibera is source of work force. Homeless individuals would not be in a situation to keep a stable job.
- Kibera is a large market that is served by businesses of Nairobi.
- Kibera is a community of very entrepreneurial cosmopolitan people, with the desire to improve their lives, and that provides a source of innovative ideas.

### Kibera: a very efficient economic centre

Kibera is home to people with a lower income. But although they have sparse resources, their large numbers has created a big marketplace, that has evolved towards an efficient market system that provides valuable products and services to individuals and families at very competitive prices. Even though houses don't have water pipes, people have the possibility to purchase water in small quantities. There are transport services that will bring you the water to your home. The same water is possibly used several times, for cooking, for washing and for growing vegetables. The pro-capita use of water is significantly lower than in a family living in a modern house, where drinking water is also wasted for toilet use. Kibera's market place is very price sensitive: each shop usually displays the cost of their products. Shops for food don't use scales. The price of tomatoes is preceded by the number of pieces you purchase, "4-20" meaning 20 KSH per 4 tomatoes. There are plenty of businesses that buy products in large quantities and resell them in retail quantities. Any product or service is available in a way that can be accessed by people with a limited purchase power. There are many businesses that repair small things. In other parts of the city, people will probably throw away a small damaged item and buy a replacement. In Kibera, you will find someone that will be able to fix it.

Thanks to this efficient economic environment, even poor people have access to a large variety of products and services. The marketplace offers not only basic products, such as food and clothing, but also entertainment. Children have the possibility to play the latest Sony play-station game for just few shillings. There are theatres with the latest movies or places where you can watch the football matches only available on pay TV.

Kibera offers the best value to impoverished people and a broad offer of products and services tailored to their needs and their purchase power. Anywhere else the same individual would pay more or have less choice.

Kibera provides an incredible number of business opportunities. Small shops and business activities are everywhere and many of them are managed by women. It would not surprise me to learn that female business owner rate was much larger than the male equivalent in Kibera.

### Kibera is a settlement for lower income people

People living in Kibera are lower income people. There is a tendency to describe Kibera residents as poor people, but this is not correct. There are many definitions of poverty (see page 23 and following of the book "Beyond Poverty and Vulnerability in Kenya", Mwangi Mathai, 2015, University of Nairobi

Press), but in my view, none seems to be generally applicable to the Kibera residents. In Kibera there are obviously poor people, but most residents are not deprived of access to the essential goods, services and assets. People in Kibera are not vulnerable and without choice. The Kibera settlement and the very efficient Kibera economy are the distinguishing points that lead me not to categorise these people as poor. People with the same income level living in another place, without the broad access to cheap products and services, would be in a worse situation and would fall in the poverty category.

Kibera is a place that serves low income people and allows them to stay above the poverty line. From this point of view, Kibera may be considered a solution to poverty and not as it's problem.

## No alternative to Kibera

This document has no intention to justify the existence of slums. It is estimated that one billion people, i.e. 1/3 of residents of large agglomerations on earth, live in settlements like Kibera. Currently, there are clearly no alternatives and the idea of getting rid of slums is not an option. Most of the cities and countries have limited resources and are usually in a very bad financial situation. It is true that financial resources might have been allocated in a better way, but then, difficulties in managing the exponential growth of agglomerations, must not be underestimated. Providing water, electricity, transport and housing for millions of people is not easy to achieve and it is perfectly normal that tensions arise and that governments and the political system have a difficult time facing these challenges.

All governments have the ambition to provide a better living for their residents. Slums therefore, in a way, represent a system failure, an everyday demonstration of the limits and inability of the political system to creating place with better living conditions. Emphasising the positive elements of slums will help solving these problems, and probably provide a better insight into the slums realities. Kibera is not just an informal settlement where people live. It is a complex and large social community, as well as a pulsing economic environment that is home and living base for a great number of individuals and businesses. Project that are aimed at just providing better residences might solve the housing problem, but risks taking away the social and economic environment that makes life sustainable for the people living there. Replicating such an efficient social and economic system is very difficult.

## A better image of Kibera is needed

Individuals you meet in Kibera, like other Kenyan people, are very friendly and open towards others. When visiting Kibera, one almost automatically makes a distinction between the situation of Kibera and that of the people living there. In Kibera, like in many other areas of the city, there are individuals that dedicate themselves to crime, but most people are honest and hard working. It is obvious though, that the negative stereotypes have an adverse impact on the life of the residents and limit their opportunities to find jobs or housing. Improving the image of Kibera will therefore bring positive effects for the people and the businesses.

The "Benediction of Kibera", from the Latin "benedicere", literally "speaking good of" is a real necessity.

## A vision for Kibera

If we acknowledge that there is currently no alternative to Kibera, the only realistic solution will therefore be to improve Kibera. This will take a lot of time and there is a need for a vision encompassing the long-term future of the settlement.

Consider it as a planning for growing a company or a city: it will be very important to conceive and project a vision for an improved Kibera. We know that many plans have already failed, but it will not be possible to reach an objective if we do not imagine and visualise it beforehand. We will therefore call Kibera 2.0 a vision for a better Kibera. The objective of Kibera 2.0 is to describe how this settlement could provide a better solution for lower income people.

### Accepting the existence of the slum

The first step for the vision is accepting the existence of the slum. This is not an easy political undertaking, because slums are considered as a problem and not as a solution. Dismantling the slum is still considered by many as the only viable approach. Kibera should remain a residential place that offers housing and business opportunities for lower income people. Houses should continue to provide the same basic and cheap stay as today. Shops and other business activities should also continue to be run on the same low priced basis as today.

### Imagining the future of Kibera

The world is changing very fast, new technologies, new working models and new ways of thinking are becoming available. The focus for improvements is on advancements in basic infrastructure, water, sewerage, hygienic condition, but a vision should reach beyond basic necessities and consider how Kibera should and could look in many years and how to take hold of new opportunities. The temporary impossibility to fix basic necessities should not prevent one to think, experiment and introduce new ideas.

### Settlement with high population density

Kibera offers housing to low income people, for which a better house would be out of reach. Architects and planners should refrain from providing “normal” solutions. The current Kibera housing concept, even if considered as below the minimum standard for housing by most, should be maintained. Improvements are needed, but the focus on lower residential cost should be maintained. In Kibera many people live in the same small house. This is one of the main important factors keeping the costs low. Containing the use of land is very important as it provides lower income families with an access to a living space. A typical Kibera house, where everybody lives together, in one or a few rooms, is nowadays considered sub-standard. In the history of the humanity, this way of living represented the normality and still is a common residential standard in many regions. Families living together in a small place should not be considered as unnatural. There are communities on our planet that are fighting against the development concept and wish to maintain this living tradition. This concept is also very resource saving. In view of the growing population, re-evaluating this housing concept could be central to the whole humanity. Architects, planning and technology progresses should focus not on replacing, but making small family houses for lower income people more inhabitable.

These informal settlements, made of corrugated iron sheets, have a kind of natural beauty, especially when compared to many of today’s grey and identical looking suburbs. The Kibera slum has been built and has evolved based on necessities and using very flexible materials. Architects and planners should be creative and find a way to preserve this unique and distinctive characteristic. New buildings, including those offering more space, should possibly maintain these basic characteristics. It should be achievable to develop a preservation concept without moving towards the anonymous architectural concept of many suburbs of modern cities.

A central point to housing improvement is the possibility to allow private investment to be profitable. Multiple floor buildings already exist in Kibera. Other slums are as of now growing in height. This is an interesting evolution in that it allows the reduction of land requirement. But it would be appropriate to accompany this evolution with a general plan on building elevation and ensure that public



infrastructure grows simultaneously. It goes beyond the scope of this document to suggest possible solutions, but there are already a lot of “do’s and don’ts” on improving slums. This information could be complemented with the technology advance that will come in the next decade, as regards solar electricity and spreading of small grids.

Having a vision on how Kibera should look in ten years is a basis for people to plan and invest.

### Small shared services

The plan should consider creating places within the settlement that can host small shared services, that can be easily reached and shared by neighbourhood individuals and businesses. The most important are toilettes and washing. These could be operated by a business or managed as a community service.

### Solar energy and virtual power station

Solar energy is a great opportunity for Africa. In the long term, energy could be made available at low cost, without the huge investments and maintenance costs of a centralised energy grid. Solar panel and battery powered small grids will make electricity available at accessible cost to houses, small businesses, industries and transportation in all regions. Solar cells are now beginning to be embedded in other materials (such as tiles). These products, combined with small batteries could provide the energy necessary for a small home. Connecting batteries together, will make it possible to create a grid that works as a virtual power station, providing hundred of thousands of homes with power. A virtual power station of small, better and cheaper batteries, could allow a small house to have induction cookers and hot sterilised water.

Those small electric systems could also become a source of income for many families. During the day the panels charge the battery and, thanks to the virtual power station, the surplus will be made available to businesses and people charging their cars.

During the night, an electric grid can provide public lamps with light even within small alleys. This will make the slum more secure at night.

### Creating a modular piping system

A major problem for Kibera is the water supply and lack of proper sewage. A vision of Kibera 2.0 should include a new modular piping system, that should include both sewers, non drinking and clean water. The used water should possibly be recovered, purified and used for non drinking (industrial) purposes.

### Creating a legal fundament

Formally, Kibera land is property of the government. A long term leasing possibility should be made available, with the clause that constructions should comply with the plan. This will create value for the owner and allow him to get a loan to finance the necessary investments.

Land set aside for public infrastructures, should remain full property of the government. With the income of the lease the state could create a fund that is used to reclaiming the land currently occupied and to create the infrastructure and the piping system.

### Community works

In Kibera ordinary inhabitants can easily accomplish many of the infrastructure works, such as fixing a hole in the street of a pedestrian walk. Instead of waiting for a solution, that will never come, improvements can be made via a community service (like the Umuganda in Rwanda).

Community works can be fostered by creating and supporting associations that organise the work and provide training, tools, work clothes and the necessary materials for the tasks.

Associations have proved to be a great tool to provide positive experiences and integrate young individuals.

## The digital transformation

Kenya is already at the forefront of the digital revolution. Phone and internet connections are good. People speak English fluently. Individuals could be trained to provide digital services. Co-workers installation, with good internet connection, paper and 3D printing, could provide a place for people to offer digital services and the related workforce.

## Tourism

All taxi drivers in Nairobi we have asked confirmed to us that many tourists would like to visit Kibera. This potential should be cultivated.

The Kibera Tours concept could be improved by creating a Kibera Tourist Office and a tourist map. These simple actions will make it clear to everybody that tourists are welcomed in Kibera and could also indicate places where it is secure for tourists to walk. An increase of visitors will promote the development of Tourists friendly shops.

Walking through Kibera is very interesting, but is made difficult by the traffic running through Kibera. On some days and at specific hours favourable for shopping, the main street should be closed to vehicles, making shopping and visiting more alluring for tourists.

## Transport services

Public transport offer is very advanced in Nairobi and there are plenty of companies and cooperatives that provide affordable transport all over the city. It also offers affordable transport services to Kibera residents. Unfortunately, the traffic in Nairobi is jammed during many hours of the day. Public transport could become faster by reserving existing lanes to public transport, avoiding traffic jams and making it more appealing to it's users. A priority line policy has been successfully implemented in many big cities and with a lot of success.

Most people living in Kibera don't own a car. Therefore offering a line reserved for public transport serving Kibera, would make those services much faster.

The city should also be considering developing a bus based public transport infrastructure similar to the [Transmilenio in Bogotá](#).

## Improving the image of Kibera

The current public image of Kibera, especially online, is very bad, A better image would make business more profitable and also help it's people feeling better. This is not only a problem for Kibera, but also for Kenya and Africa. In the news, on Internet and generally, the negative aspects hide a more positive reality.

Most importantly for Kibera, would be to define it as the settlement of homes for lower income people and not one for poor people. Also, the efficiency of its economy and the entrepreneurship of Kibera people should be made evident.

The idea of witnessing the positive elements of Kibera was welcomed by all people I spoke with Rabala a local artist of the Kibera Masai MBili who designed and printed some nice-looking T-Shirt for us, with the writing "Kibera – Enterprising people". While presenting and wearing them, the feedback was positive. The T-Shirt, made with Kenyan cotton and manually printed in Kibera, can be purchased at the art centre.





Kibera – Enterprising People  
T-Shirt