

An aerial photograph of a soccer field in a densely populated urban area, likely a slum. The field is enclosed by a green safety net. The ground is dirt, and several young people are playing soccer. In the background, there are multi-story buildings with laundry hanging on balconies. The text "PLAY HARD DREAM BIG" is painted on the back wall of the field. The title "YOUTH LED DEVELOPMENT:" is overlaid in large, bold, yellow and white letters.

YOUTH LED DEVELOPMENT:

A CASE STUDY FROM THE MATHARE SLUM, KENYA

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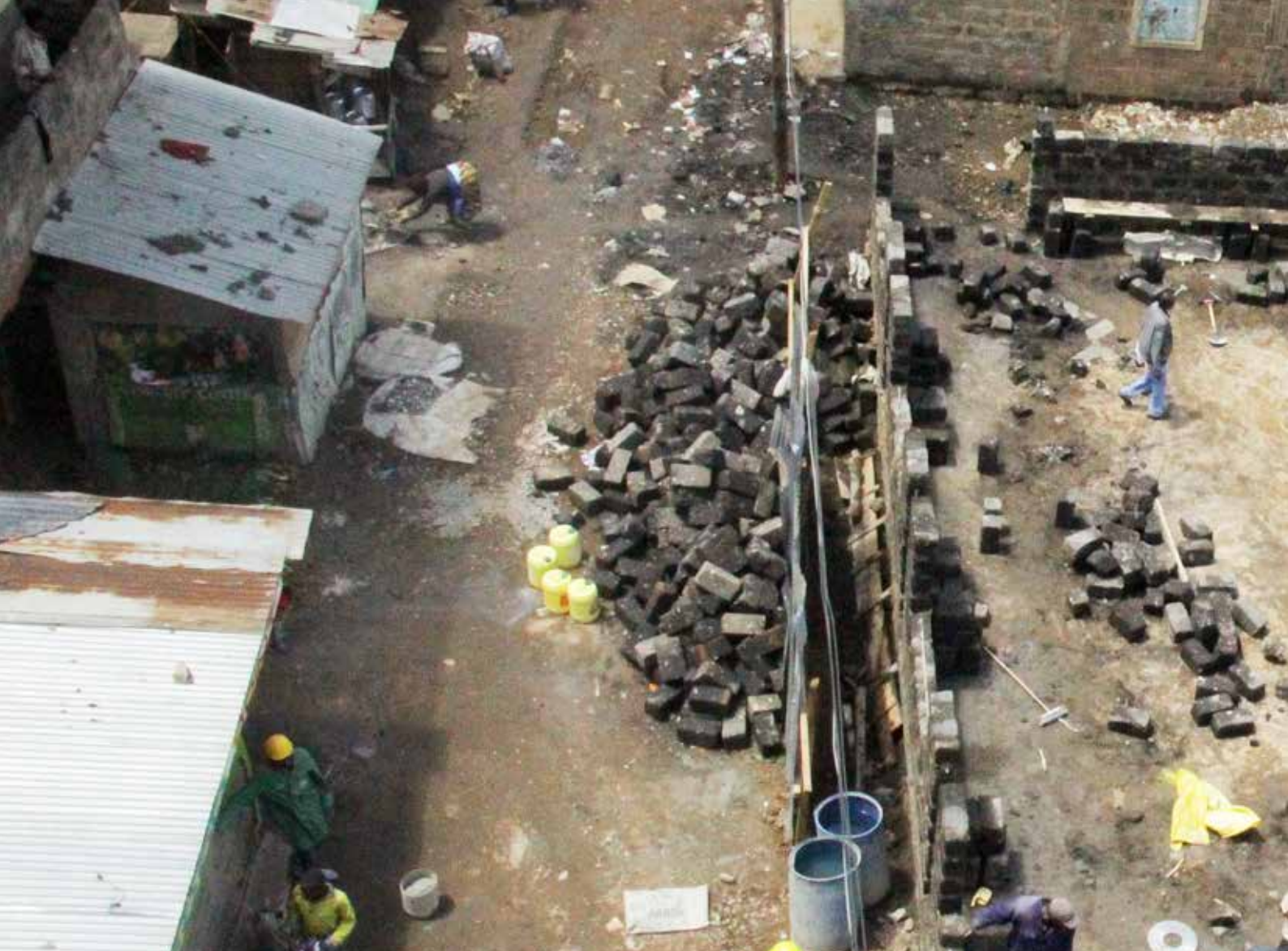


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Slum Soccer, Mlangi Kubwa 2014. © Nathaniel Canuel/UN-Habitat

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INTRODUCTION

Young people represent an increasing share of the global urban population. Approximately half of the world's population is under the age of 25, and 1.3 billion of these are young people between the ages of 12 and 24. The urban population in developing countries consists of an increasing number of poor urban youth. It is estimated that 60% of all urban dwellers will be under the age of 18 by 2030, most of which will live in slums and informal settlements (UN-Habitat, 2013a).

Youth have the right to have their opinions expressed and taken into account in matters that affect them, as stated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art.12). The development of urbanized and urbanizing communities affects young people to a large extent, and their contribution is crucial to ensure a sustainable urban future.

Youth-Led development is a concept that places youth at the centre of their development. UN-Habitat has developed five principles of youth-led development, known as the Kampala principles:

1. Youth define their own development goals and objectives
2. Youth have a social and physical space to participate in development and to be regularly consulted
3. Adult mentorship and peer-to-peer mentorship are encouraged
4. Youth act as role models to help other youth engage in development
5. Youth are integrated into all local and national development programmes and frameworks

UN-Habitat believes that youth can be assets to their communities, and local, national, and international governments can engage and support youth and youth-led initiatives. The UN-Habitat Urban Youth Fund is one example of how youth-led development can be encouraged and enhanced.¹

¹ For more information on youth-led development and the UN-Habitat Urban Youth Fund, see for example: http://www.globalyouthdesk.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=155:mapping%20urban%20youth-led%20development&Itemid=63 Accessed 05.08.2015

This paper seeks to illustrate an example of youth-led development, by showcasing how youth have contributed and are contributing to community development in Mlango Kubwa, a ward in the Mathare slums of Nairobi, Kenya.

This article presents the story and function of the community-based organization Mathare Environmental Conservation Youth Group

(MECYG)), based in Mlango Kubwa in Mathare. The focus of the data collection is to map the previous and current functions of MECYG, and how their work has contributed to development in their community. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with members of the youth group as well as group interviews with members of the community. Secondary data was collected from existing research and reports on Mathare and Youth-Led development.





Slum Soccer, Mlango Kubwa 2014.
© Nathaniel Canuel/UN-Habitat

YOUNG AND DISADVANTAGEOUS IN KENYA

The population of Kenya was estimated to reach 46 million in 2015 (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2010), and is projected to reach 60 million by 2030 (UNFPA, 2013). Young people between the ages of 15-34 currently constitutes over 35% of the total Kenyan population.² Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, houses approximately three million dwellers (CBS, 2008). Nairobi is home to some of the oldest and biggest slums in Africa, which face deep socio-economic and infrastructural challenges. Unemployment, lack of sufficient waste management systems, and a growing informal housing sector are also among the issues that are to a high degree present in this metropolis (CBS, 2008).

The Mathare slum is a place where these grievances are particularly visible. The quality of life is low and public service delivery within most areas is considered highly insufficient (Darkey & Kariuka, 2013). Mathare was built on top of a waste dump, and it is the second largest and the oldest slum in the city. Mathare mainly consists of wooden and tin shacks (COHRE, 2008). The area is densely populated, and is inhabited by 600,000 to 800,000 people (COHRE, 2008). Security is a big issue in Mathare. With lack of streetlights and few public spaces, the risk of being exposed or becoming a victim of crime and violence are high.



Mlango Kubwa. © Nathaniel Canuel/UN-Habitat

² The official UNDESA definition of youth is people between the ages of 15-24, while in Kenya it is 18-34.



Pequininos Social Hall 2014. © Nathaniel Canuel/UN-Habitat

Mathare is divided into several wards, where each ward constitutes a community and an electoral constituency. The ward of Mlango Kubwa, the selected area for this study, consists of approximately 38,000 inhabitants (Softkenya, 2011). There have been a number of improvements in Mlango Kubwa over recent years. One characteristic of Mlango Kubwa that makes it different from most other areas in Mathare are its high-rise buildings. Since the late 1990s the high-rises have been increasing in number, allowing a larger number of

inhabitants to dwell in Mlango Kubwa. Electricity is now in place, and there is limited access to clean water. Sanitation is still an issue, although several public toilets have been built. Over the last decade or so, there have been significant improvements in terms of cleanliness and access to public space. Several of these changes can be attributed to the Mathare Environmental Conservation Youth Group (MECYG), a local youth organisation that works to improve the livelihoods of people in Mlango Kubwa.

MATHARE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION YOUTH GROUP

Mathare Environmental Youth Group started 1997, under the name of Mathare One Organized Youth Group. The current name became the first official name when the group registered in public records. When registration became necessary, the members of MECYG decided that they needed a name that would describe the function of the group. Although their mandate spans broader today, environmental conservation is still at the very core of their scope.

MECYG sprung out of Pequeninos, the Mlango Kubwa soccer team. Pequeninos was one of the many local soccer teams that were founded as a result of Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA). MYSA, amongst other things, sends young slum dwellers to participate in the soccer tournament Norway Cup every year. Coming back from the Norway Cup one year, the organisation urged the participants to go back to their communities and create opportunities for young people through sports. Pequeninos was a Brazilian team that had beaten MYSA in the semifinals, and with this in mind, Pequeninos became the name of Mlango Kubwa's team. The team consisted of a group of young men and boys that enjoyed playing; however, their aspirations went beyond the game. Several members of the team decided that they wanted to do something about the challenges that they and the community were facing. One of the founders of MECYG, Isaac (also known as Kaka), puts the transition from being a group of friends playing soccer to a community development group in these terms:

We were finishing school and we needed something to do so that we could support ourselves, because we were now growing up and getting out of our parents home. We started Mathare One Organized Youth Group. It started as a waste management group, because when we were started, we were looking at the challenges that were affecting the community, and there was garbage everywhere.

The origin of the group was in that way a wish to address two of the main grievances in the community: 1) the uncontrollable amounts of garbage, and 2) the high youth unemployment. Their response was targeted. They started a waste management system, which would employ young people by paying them for removing garbage from the community.

• • • ISAAC MUTISYA MUKASA • • • • •

Isaac, known by most people as Kaka, is a resident and community leader in Mlango Kubwa. His nickname means "brother" in Swahili, a name he thinks fits him well, as he considers himself a brother to many. His efforts have been crucial to the development of the public spaces for youth in Mlango Kubwa, and he deserves credit for both founding and maintaining the important work of MECYG over the last 15-20 years. Isaac is currently the chairman of MECYG, as well as being involved in a number of organisations, projects and processes with the aim of improving the lives of Nairobi's slum dwellers. He is a gatekeeper and a link between the community and government, both sides consult with him in important questions regarding the challenges and grievances that still are apparent in Mlango Kubwa and Mathare.

• • • • •

The group started out with 15 members, and today there are 40 active members, as well as a main board and a board of trustees. Although the number of active members is limited to 40, Kaka estimates that around 150-200 children and youth are involved in different activities within the organization.



Mlango Kubwa. ©UN-Habitat

Waste management

The garbage situation in Mlango Kubwa was acutely unsatisfactory, and both households and public areas of the ward were overflowing with waste, with no system in place to deal with it. This posed a threat in terms of hygiene and the spreading of diseases, which made the area very unsatisfactory in terms of living standards. The first chairman of MECYG, Philip, describes the state of Mlango Kubwa at the time as: very dirty, undeveloped, and with sewage running all over. Philip also

says that there was no opportunities for youth, and that a combination of these factors inspired him and his group of friends to start the waste management programme. The efforts started out by the members of the group collecting garbage in households closest to where they lived, around 500 households in total. They transported the waste to a centralized dumping spot, where it was left for the City Council services to pick up. A frequent issue was, and continues to be, that the garbage was not picked up at the dump created by the group; however, the waste would at least be removed from the houses and areas with

the most pressing need to be waste-free. The business has gradually expanded over the years, and MECYG now covers most households in Mlango Kubwa. The group of garbage collectors goes around in the community every Sunday to collect the households' waste. Each household pays a monthly fee of 150 Kenya Shillings (approximately 1.5 USD) for this service. The fee ensures the sustainability of the programme, as this is what pays the salary for the youth that collects the garbage. As mentioned, a recurring issue is the City Council service inactivity when it comes to collecting the garbage from the centralized dumping point. This is one of the main obstacles of the model, which needs improvement, and in spite of repeated attempts to fix the problem, such as paying a fee for the garbage to be picked up, the

issue has not been resolved in a durable manner. Philip now describes the community as a good place to be: a clean place where security also has improved. Philip attributes this change to the waste management program and highlights that it has succeeded in both cleaning the community and creating opportunities for young people.

The programme not only benefits the regular garbage collectors and the households, but it also provides opportunities for the street kids in the area. There are approximately 500 street kids in Mlango Kubwa, and MECYG provides them with the opportunity of collecting garbage, which they in turn get paid for by the group.



Another component of the waste management programme is recycling plastics. MECYG buys plastic from youth collecting waste and process it for industrial use. In this way, they add value to the existing activities within waste management. The group has identified the method and has the technology to go through this process. In 2011, they won the Ministry of Youth's Top Environmental Conservationists award. The group also trained the majority of other youth groups in Nairobi who also use the same model. This is normally an integrated part of the programme, but due to lack of space this part of the business is currently on hold.

According to research, the "Business of waste" has in several slum communities become a platform for political mobilization. The fact that young people manage to deal with an issue that the government has neglected and failed to manage empowers them and puts them in a position where they are able to negotiate with politicians and promote political demands (Thieme, 2010). This is also reflected in several of the members' stories on how the waste management is changing the community. Through making a difference in the community, the group has gained the trust of the elders, politicians from the area, and government officials. They have become community leaders, and often serve as the much needed link between the community and the government.

Loyce, a member of MECYG, thinks that not only has MECYG made an impact in terms of cleaning up the community, but that they have also had an educational effect on the community. She says that people are more aware of how they handle their garbage now; they have been educated into not throwing garbage anywhere like they used to do in the past. Ken, another member, highlights the wider impact of the MECYG waste management programme. The group has engaged and trained youth groups from all over Kenya in how to start waste management as an income generating activity.



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Slum Soccer, Mlango Kubwa 2014. © Nathaniel Canuel UN-Habitat

Public space

The creation and renewal of public spaces in Mlango Kubwa has also long been an important mission for MECYG. Although the Waste Management Programme was the initial activity of the group, the renewal of spaces has very much been inherent from the beginning, starting with claiming random spaces for playing soccer. Originally, the group did not have any permanent space for playing, but would use available areas of roads and other spaces to kick the ball around. They soon agreed that the need for more youth-friendly spaces in the area was grave, and that they as a group could do something about that. Access to land is generally a highly contested issue in slums, and

the increased privatization of land also threatens the possibilities of claiming and maintaining spaces for public use (UN-Habitat, 2013b). Kaka and MECYG knew that they had to be smart and play politics in order to get anything done. What Kaka refers to as a “secret weapon” resulted in them being allowed to build a youth centre on a piece of publicly owned land in Mlango Kubwa. Elections were coming up, and they promised support for politicians that would support their case, and in that way they succeeded in their demands. The land though, was at the time a waste dump, and it would take public effort to get the area cleaned up. Kaka explains the state of the land at the time in the following terms:



...this centre was a big heap of garbage. We used to play here when we were young, and that was not a good thing for us. People would throw very bad things, even aborted babies, and there would be dogs eating the corpses. For us, this was not a good thing to see, and it was not a good neighbourhood to grow up in.

In addition to being clever in the way they used elections as leverage, MECYG had the advantage of being the first case of young people demanding space in the area. Through their platform as a waste management group, they had also earned the trust from the community, and in particular its elders, which was an invaluable asset when negotiating with the politicians. Eventually the Mlango Kubwa MCA³, made sure that the space was cleaned up and set aside for the purpose of a youth community centre. Keeping the space waste-free proved to

be challenging though, as this space was institutionalized as a waste dump for the community over a number of years. In order to keep it clean and free from waste, members of MECYG used to sleep there to keep people from throwing waste in the given space. Although they guarded the land in this way, Kaka also attributes keeping the space from becoming a dump again to the waste management programme. The fact that they were giving the community an alternative to throwing the garbage in random places was a success factor.

The current youth centre is the fourth centre on the land since it was allocated for the purpose. Where as the first three centres filled the purpose of a youth centre; however, they were of temporary. The current centre was publicly funded and is a permanent structure, which serves the entire community with its potential of many different activities. It has a kitchen, bathrooms, a large hall with a TV, chairs and tables, as

³ Member of County Assembly

well as a roof that currently serves as an urban garden, as part of the National Youth Service (NYS) programme⁴. The group has managed to fundraise to build a second floor, and their aim is to eventually have three floors.

Marybell is 36 years old, and has been living in Mlango Kubwa her entire life. She has been able to see the changes that have occurred. Marybell sees the youth centre as a safe space and an alternative for the young people that could easily turn to drugs and crime if they did not have access to the spaces that MECYG created. She gets support from other members of the community, such as Ken, who also highlight the importance of the youth centre providing a space for children and youth to do their homework. Most of the young people in Mlango Kubwa live in flats where the conditions for doing homework are insufficient, and hence providing them with a centre where they can get their work done enhances their educational opportunities.

Another recent development in the community is the establishment of a soccer field, named Slum Soccer by the community. The space is another symbol of the influence that MECYG has, as they managed to claim the space for public use, after a struggle against private interests that had grabbed and was trying to hold on to the land for commercial purposes. The field is centered in the middle of Mlango Kubwa, and is overlooked by the surrounding buildings. With the recent establishment of floodlights, the field is now a safe environment for young people both during the day and after dark. Kaka claims that the space has meant an improvement in terms of security in the community:

The kids used to play on the roadside, but now the parents know where to go looking for their kids. They don't have to go around the whole community to find their kids; there is a safe space where the kids can play.

Based on the stories from members of the community, these two spaces: the youth centre and the soccer field, have had a significant impact on the community both in terms of safety and in creating opportunities for young people. As the first youth group creating spaces such as these in Mlango Kubwa, it has been a pioneer group, which in addition to creating opportunities and spaces through their own capacity, has inspired other youth groups to do the same. There are currently several other youth groups in Mlango Kubwa that are both involved in the waste management business, and that provide spaces for young people.



Mlango Kubwa. © Nathaniel Canuel/ UN-Habitat

⁴ The National Youth Service (NYS) is a government programme targeted at reducing youth unemployment and building human resource to undertake national development programmes. The programme was first launched in 1964, then relaunched in 2013. The programme employs 482 youth in Mlango Kubwa, and they use the youth centre as their local base (National youth service, 2014).

Security

When community members were asked about the state of the Mlango Kubwa 10-15 years ago, they quickly turned to describing how bad the situation was in terms of security. According to Bosco, a 38 year old Mlango Kubwa resident, walking at night was a big risk. Young criminals who frequented the area would be equipped with knives, machetes, and some would even have guns, and would steal everything from your phone to your shoes. Although, losing your belongings was not the worst you could fear, in MECYG alone, several members were killed. The situation has, according to the community members, improved over the years, but the most drastic change happened around 3 years ago, when several youth groups in Mlango Kubwa decided to do something about the security issue in the community. Addressing the issue was the first crucial step, and eventually it led to the youth groups providing security in terms of patrolling the community of Mlango Kubwa. Marybell describes the current situation in the following terms:

Security now is perfect. You can walk around with a phone, or a laptop. Before you could not even walk around talking on your phone... You can now even go jogging at five in the morning.

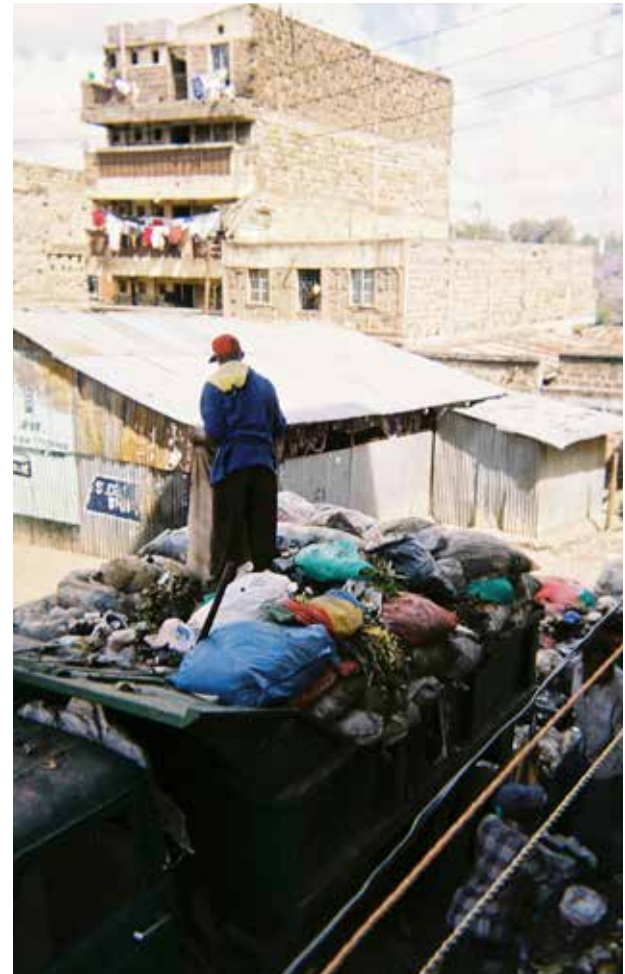
She highlights the importance of young people coming together and talking about the issue, although she also attributes some of the changes to an improvement in government.



Mlango Kubwa. © Nathaniel Canuel/ UN-Habitat

MATHARE ENVIRONMENTAL YOUTH GROUP- BEST PRACTICE ON YOUTH-LED DEVELOPMENT

The concrete results that has come from the work of MECYG, shows in that youth can be an important force of community change and development. The physical spaces they have created, as well as the waste management and security programmes, have been crucial contributions to the relief of some of the main grievances the community was facing few years ago. As described, the initiative arose from youth wanting to enhance their own opportunities and create a better community for themselves and their peers, and measures were designed accordingly. Young people themselves took initiatives; therefore, the goals and objectives can in be attributed as being defined by the youth, as stated in Kampala principle 1 on youth-led development. In regards to principle 2, the young members of Mlango Kubwa have created their own social and physical space for participation in development. The youth centre works as a hub for activities in the community, as well as for development projects through the NYS. The youth whom started this development, such as Kaka, have now become trusted community leaders, and serve as an entry point for politicians and as mediators between the community and the government. When asked about the sustainability of MECYG, several of the members highlight the importance of recruiting and maintaining new, and younger members. They have started a mentorship programme aimed at empowering the younger members of the community, and through this they are able to maintain a steady membership base with capable and engaged youth. The fact that other youth groups have looked to MECYG and copied their work both within waste management and public space development and renewal showcases their ability to act as role models in helping other youth engage in development, as stated in Kampala principle 4.



Mlango Kubwa. © Nathaniel Canuel/ UN-Habitat



Mlango Kubwa. © Nathaniel Canuel/ UN-Habitat

Kenya still has a long way to go when it comes to integrating and mainstreaming youth into their local and national policies. Although a national youth strategy was created in 2006 with a strategic plan for implementation starting in 2007, the Ministry of Youth Affairs was disbanded after the 2013 elections, and there has since been unclarities regarding what entity is responsible for further renewing and implementing the strategy (Youthpolicy.org, 2014).

The case of Mlango Kubwa and Mathare Environmental Conservation Youth Group illustrates that development can unfold in a truly youth-led and bottom up manner, where government commitment is rather a

result of young peoples' ability to advocate for their own defined goals and objectives, rather than top-down strategies and plans created from a platform peripheral to the reality of youth in Mathare. This case shows that substantial community change can and will happen if youth are heard and taken seriously in matters that affect them. It is in this regard, an argument for initiatives that support and enhances youth-led development: such as the UN-Habitat Urban Youth Fund. Through the various initiatives of MECYG in Mlango Kubwa, the community has become clean, safe, and as Lillian, one of the respondent states: "A place where people can feel at home" (sic).

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