

MUKURU RISING

How a new designation could transform the Nairobi slum and help end the “poverty penalty” its residents face

POSTED BY ALANNA MITCHELL ON MARCH 29, 2018

Jane Weru, executive director of [Akiba Mashinani Trust](#), knew something was seriously wrong in 2011 when residents of Nairobi’s Mukuru neighbourhood started showing up at her office in the Kenyan capital.

They were being evicted from their homes in great numbers. And by homes, they meant one-room shacks made of rusted corrugated iron sheeting in informal settlements densely packed on land once slated for light industrial activity. Typically measuring three metres by three metres, some had dirt floors. One common means of eviction was night-time arson, forcing the residents to flee. Often, residents were prevented from going back into their homes by gangs who protected the property until the landlord had swiftly rebuilt the home and installed new tenants.

Weru, a lawyer and human rights activist whose organization is a housing development and finance agency affiliated with Slum Dwellers International, an advocacy group for the urban poor in Africa, Asia and Latin America, began plotting how she could help. Because Kenya had passed a constitution in 2010 enshrining economic and social rights, she knew there were new legal avenues for challenging the evictions.

But before she could know what the legal redress was, she had to know who owned the land in Mukuru and who lived there. She and her organization began to amass evidence, a continuing [research project](#) that the International Development Research Centre has helped support with a two-year grant of \$633,600.

Weru says some of the findings shocked her. For one thing, they discovered that there were more than 100,000 households in Mukuru, each housing three people, for a total of about 300,000 residents. Not only that, but there was a total lack of basic services. Few homes had access to toilets. Only about 3,000 had shared pit latrines which were emptied manually, Weru says.

Equally as disturbing was the fact that 94 per cent of the people were renting. They often paid rent to people who owned the structures but not the land underneath. The land was owned privately, often by well-connected members of the Kenyan elite, including government officials, civil servants and business owners. Many had been allowed to purchase the land for roads, railway activities or utilities, but had never followed through on those developments. The evictions were happening because the land had suddenly become more valuable.

Because residents were settled on private land, they had no access to city services. That meant they were paying astronomical prices for the little unsafe water they were able to get — sometimes as much as six times more than people who lived in serviced areas of Nairobi.

It amounted to a “poverty penalty,” the researchers found. It also meant that a massive amount of money was circulating in Mukuru that could conceptually be put toward raising the standard of living



Researchers with the Akiba Mashinani Trust examine a map of Nairobi’s Mukuru slum. In August 2017, activists succeeded in having the settlement designated as a special planning area, the first step in a process that could help transform the slum and the lives of its 300,000 residents. (Photo: Akiba Mashinani Trust)

rather than paying exorbitant prices for necessities. One research team calculated that money freed up from these extra costs could come to US\$500 million over 10 years.

Armed with the research and evidence of what was happening, Weru and Jack Makau, director of Slum Dwellers International in Kenya, petitioned the city of Nairobi to designate the Mukuru district as a special planning area. They succeeded on Aug. 11, 2017, a landmark day for the advocates.

The move triggered a two-year planning process that will call on the resources not only of the city, but also of 27 other organizations to develop solutions for Mukuru. “We think all these organizations will reach that capacity to benefit the people of Mukuru,” says Makau.

The residents are also heavily involved, say Makau and Weru. Neighbourhood associations representing 8,000 Mukuru families are offering suggestions. People in the community continue to collect evidence and data for the new plan. “People need to have a consultative process to agree on what to do,” Weru says.

Over time, Makau and Weru can envision people in Mukuru being secure in higher-quality rental homes. Perhaps they could own homes, aided by mortgages geared to their incomes. They would also have basic services including toilets and water, playgrounds and public spaces.

Expectations are high. One research project asked 6,000 school children what they would like to see in Mukuru. The students leapt past safe houses, toilets and running water. They dreamed of a zoo, fancy malls and amusement parks.

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READING AS THINKING

- After reading the article, what are five keywords that you would use to capture the subject matter?
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- According to UN-Habitat (the United Nations’ Human Settlements Programme), a slum household is “a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following:
 - Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions;
 - Sufficient living space which means not more than three people sharing the same room;
 - Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price;
 - Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people;
 - Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions.”

Explain how the Mukuru community fit these criteria.

- What do you think the term “poverty penalty” means? Use examples from the text to support your answer.

- Who is Jane Weru? What is her profession and why did she become involved in the development of the Mukuru community?

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5. The community of Mukuru was not a part of the city of Nairobi, meaning they could not access city services. What kinds of services does your municipality provide to your community that the residents of Mukuru could not access?

6. Considering the needs of the community, such as proper housing, sanitation facilities and clean water, and the desires of the school children interviewed, such as a zoo, amusement park and a mall, where do you think the municipality of Nairobi and aid organizations should start? What do you think is of highest priority and what is of lowest priority?

7. Why is it important that the residents of Mukuru are heavily involved in the planning process?

Prepare-Think-Pair-Share

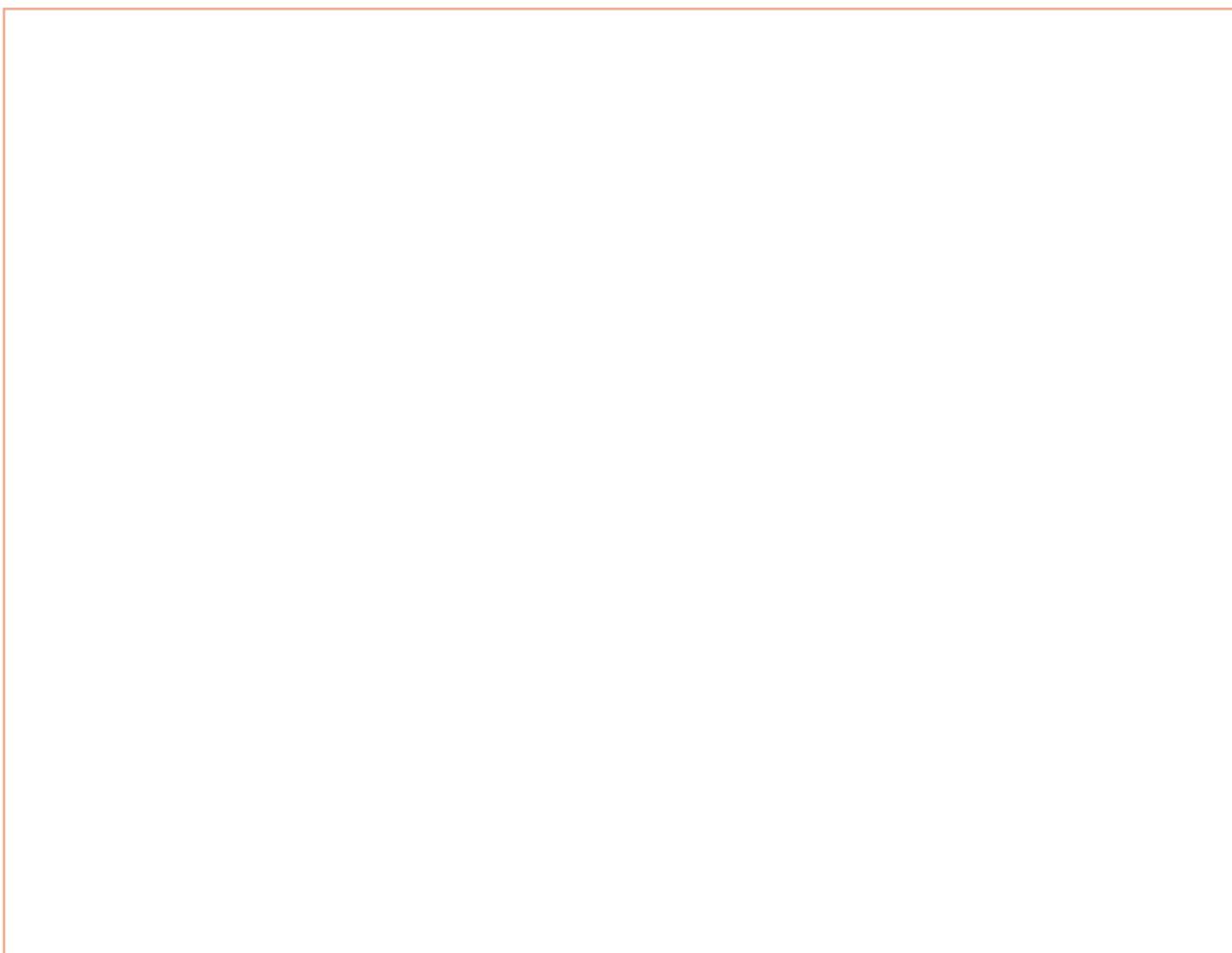
8. *Prepare*
As a class, discuss what makes a livable community. Consider characteristics such as accessibility, convenience, participation, sustainability, etc.
9. *Think*
Reflect on characteristics of a community that you believe are crucial to being considered a livable place.

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10. *Pair*

Compare answers with your partner. Work together to create a sketch of a small livable community. To add to the task, consider how environmental, political, economic or social forces such as drought, conflict, natural disasters, closing of industries and discrimination can affect a community.



11. *Share*

Present the maps to the class, highlighting key elements of the design.

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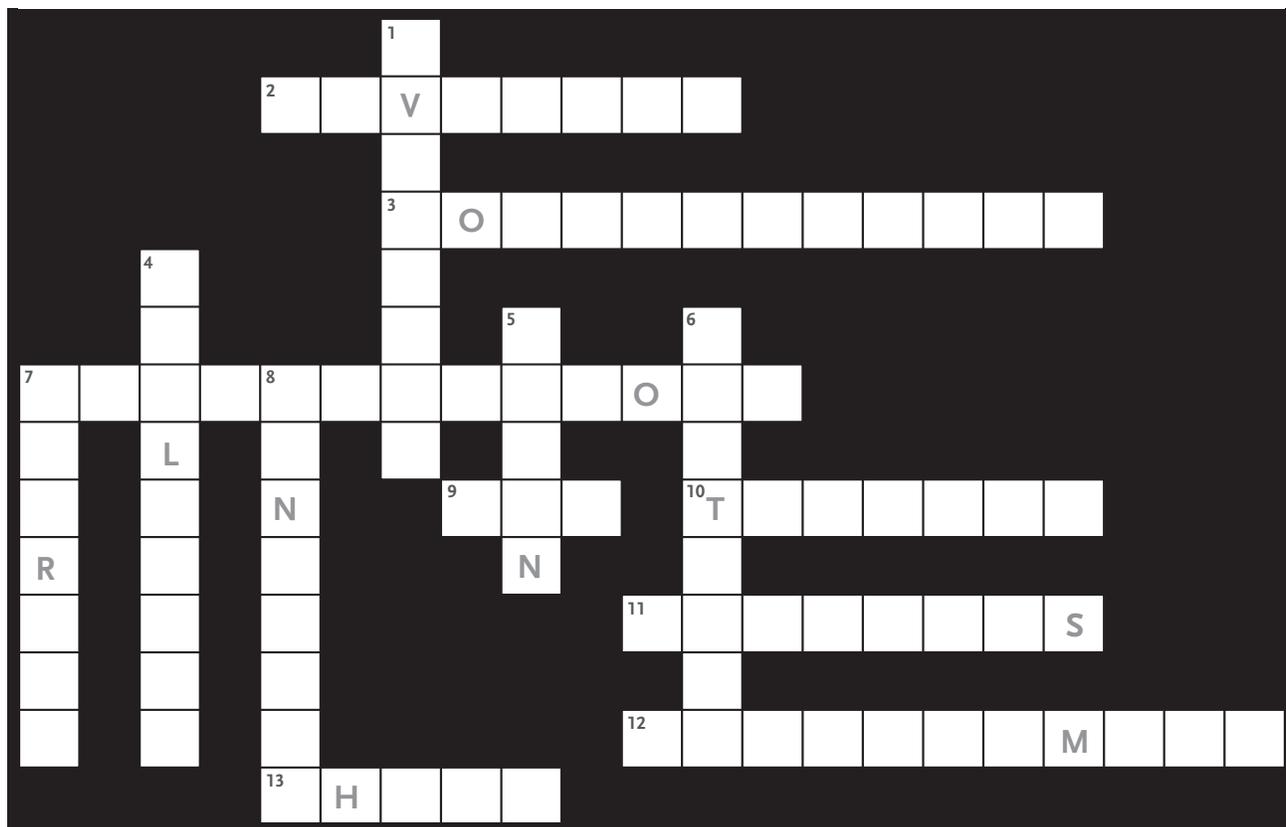
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ONLINE

1. Explore the [Mukuru Slum Development website](#) to learn about the various programs taking place to help in assisting the poor and vulnerable residents of Mukuru slums.
2. See community initiatives underway in Mukuru by watching videos created by [African Slum Journal](#).
3. Create a [Google Tour Builder](#) of the world’s largest slums, including pictures and a brief description for each example.
4. Take a look at the [Animated Map: The 20 Most Populous Cities in the World by 2100](#). What changes do you notice between 2010 and 2075?
5. How can cities expected to grow exponentially by 2075 prevent the development of slums? Take a look at the United Nations’ Sustainable Development [Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Development](#) targets for ideas.

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CROSSWORD:

Across

2. Slum Dwellers International is this type of group
3. Role of the neighbourhood associations in development project
7. Community within a city
9. A dream addition to Mukuru
10. People who rent from a landlord
11. Sanitation facility, including toilet
12. International _____ Research Centre
13. Poorly constructed home

Down

1. The action of expelling someone from property
4. Service provided to the public
5. Deliberately setting fire to property
6. Loan for a home
7. Capital of Kenya
8. Number of thousands of households living in Mukuru