

# People's room for manoeuvre in a fragmented city: State housing in Kibera, Nairobi

## Abstract

In Kenya, the direct provision of housing by the state is limited to slum upgrading and housing for state employees. In Nairobi, the Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme (KENSUP) aims to reconstruct Kibera, one of the city's largest slums, with multi-story housing. The stated goal is to rehouse the current dwellers of Kibera. However, Kibera is a melting pot of vested interests of central and local state-actors, urban dwellers and quasi-legal landlords. Its iron and mud shacks are representative of the drastic socio-spatial fragmentations of Nairobi. KENSUP brings elemental changes to Kibera's built space, economic possibilities and social relations. It expresses some of the vested interests of actors and puts others at play – thus it reflects broader African urban governance issues. This makes it an insightful platform for the examination of state-society interactions in an African city. Given the struggles around landownership as well as broader housing market dynamics, gentrification is an apparently inevitable outcome of the project. This paper addresses the struggle for access to, and the living conditions in the “decanting site”, till 2016 the only inhabited housing estate of the project. It highlights people's potential to shape events within the KENSUP project, to make use of the permanent uncertainty the project brings about, and to expand the minimal room for manoeuvre that it leaves for those living in, or refusing to move to, the housing estate.

Keywords: urbanization Africa; urban housing; slum upgrading; gentrification

## Introduction

Hanna leaves her 3-room flat in the “decanting site”, the first housing estate of the Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme (KENSUP) project in Kibera, Nairobi. She walks through the estate's gate onto a dust road lined by shacks and stalls – the southern extension of Kibera, dubbed the largest and one of the best known slums of Africa. A *matatu* takes her to Mbagathi Road east of Soweto East village (a term used for sub-

sections of Kibera). From there, a new road constructed within KENSUP with drainage lines on both sides leads her into the settlement where small shops lean against the walls of Nyayo high-rise. This is a notorious 1990s slum upgrading project which has turned middle class, a housing estate consisting of apartment blocks designed to offer modern amenities such as tap water and flush toilets to its residents. Hanna continues down the road, and her view opens to a sea of houses, Kibera's famous shacks of mud or iron walls in various heights, carpentered with the minimum amount of resources necessary, where people buy water in jerry-cans at a price around 10 times the price of the utility (Ledant et al. 2010). On Hanna's left there is a cement wall and behind it the new housing estate of Soweto East Zone A, the core of the ongoing KENSUP project in Kibera, built where she once dwelled in a shack and her future home if things go as planned for her. A three metre concrete wall, an iron gate and an armed watchman separate the estate from the surrounding shacks. Hanna walks down the road, which soon turns into a dust road with open sewage and waste scattered all along, till she arrives at her shop at a railway line. At the railway track, things apparently haven't changed since the demolitions and reconstructions of Kibera as part of KENSUP. Still, also outside the formal boundaries of the Kibera project's first phase, people's lives have been altered dramatically, whether they still live in the slum Kibera or moved to the decanting site as beneficiaries of the project.

The KENSUP project in Kibera is a state-led initiative to reconstruct the settlement, one of Nairobi's largest slums, with multi-story housing. The project's stated goal is to improve the living conditions of slum dwellers (UN-Habitat and ROK 2003: 2). However, Kibera is a melting pot of vested interests of central and local state-actors, urban dwellers and quasi-legal landlords. KENSUP brings drastic changes to the slum's built space, economic possibilities and social relations. Considering the struggles around

landownership in Kibera as well as broader housing market dynamics of Nairobi, gentrification is an apparently inevitable outcome of the KENSUP project in Kibera (Huchzermeyer 2008). The project thus expresses some of the vested interests of actors within and beyond Kibera and puts others at play. It therefore reflects broader African urban governance issues. This makes it an insightful platform for the examination of state-society interactions in an African city.

I aim to highlight people's potential to shape events within KENSUP and to expand the minimal room for manoeuvre it leaves for those living in, or refusing to move to, the housing estate. I particularly address the living conditions in the "decanting site" and the struggle for access to it. The decanting site is the first, and at the beginning of 2016, only inhabited housing estate of the Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme (KENSUP) project in Kibera and has been constructed for the successive temporary relocation of slum dwellers during the stepwise reconstruction of the Kibera (figure 1).

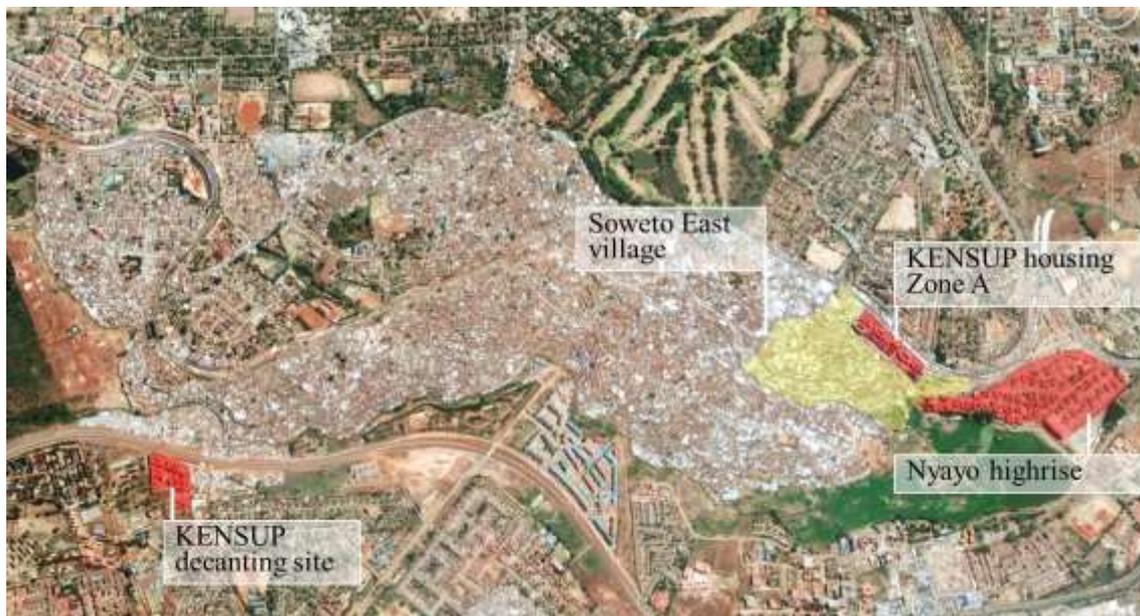


Figure 1. Soweto East village, Nyayo high-rise, KENSUP housing Zone A and the decanting site in Kibera (Adapted from: Google Earth 2014).

In the next section I introduce Kibera as a place of possibility. The subsequent sections explore the attempts of KENSUP to re-order Soweto East and the disruptions it has caused; the living situation in the decanting site; as well as former and current slum dwellers' strategies of calibrating distance and proximity to the project, the slum, and the city as a whole in order to achieve their goals. Qualitative analyses of formal plans and policies, as well as interviews with project officials unveil KENSUP's rationalizations of slum upgrading and inherent contradictions. The analysis of people's situations and strategies is based on voices of urban actors expressed in qualitative semi-structured and non-structured interviews conducted in 2005, 2006, 2007 2014 and 2015, as well as long-term observations of the situation and changes in and around Soweto East between 2005 and 2015. Long-standing personal networks with people who moved from the slum to the decanting site allowed me to get access to the place outsiders are hardly allowed to enter, presumably due to fear of bad publicity. In the conclusion I discuss the people's agency as they engage with top-down interventions in the slum.

### **Kibera – a place of possibility**

Kibera is one of Africa's "showcase slums" – its size and extreme population densities, its distinct building patterns, and until recently its almost complete lack of public services are material indicators of contestations between owners of quasi-legal structures, local and central state representatives and residents who are mostly tenants. Kibera is situated three kilometres southwest of Nairobi's centre and according to some enumerations<sup>1</sup> it is

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<sup>1</sup> The number of Kibera's inhabitants is a contested issue, apparently subject to particular interests. Estimations range from 170,000 by the 2009 National Population and Housing Census of Kenya (Daily Nation 2010) over approx. 200,000 by a mapping project

the largest and most densely populated slum of Africa. As such it reflects the manifold issues concerning living conditions of the poor, the provision of basic services and land ownership struggles in urban Africa.

### *A history of perpetual exceptionality*

Kibera is not a spontaneous settlement. Its long history dates back to 1912, when the British army gave the area to retired Nubian soldiers of the King's African Rifles (Ochieng 2007). From the beginning, Kibera, Nubian for "jungle", was in a legal limbo, as the colonial government tolerated the settlement but did nothing to formalize ownership of land or existing housing structures. As it regarded it as temporary it did not provide any services (Parsons 1997). It was exactly this diffuse, undefined status that rendered the settlement an attractive destination for Africans seeking to live inside the city and yet evade the tight and restrictive controls of the colonial government. For this exceptional status, Kibera's increasing population had to tolerate a deteriorating sanitary situation. However, it was only after independence that Kibera saw rapid growth, with the population leaping from an estimated 6,000 in 1965 to approx. 60,000 in 1980 (Kariah-Gitau, Mitullah, and Syagga 2001, 34). In 1969 the government eventually declared Kibera as government land and formally denied ownership claims of the Nubians whose prominence in the settlement had diminished due to the growing presence of Kenyans as 'structure owners' and residents (Parsons 1997). The governments before and after independence were aware of the high value of the site close to the city centre. They staged different attempts to get hold of it via the reconstruction of parts of Kibera, e.g. for

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(Mapkibera 2010) and 500,000-1 million by UN-Organizations (UN-Habitat 2007; UNESCO 2014), to more than 1 million by media and fund-raising organizations (Livingston and Walter-Drop 2014).

a golf course in the 1930s, or for middle-income housing from the 1950s till the 1990s (Médard 2010). A comparatively recent example is the early 1990s Nyayo high-rise estate, a landmark housing project of Daniel arap Moi, president of Kenya at the time, whose slogan was “*Nyayo*”, i.e. footsteps, referring to his intention to follow the path of Kenyatta, his predecessor (Huchzermeyer 2011: 141). This housing estate was initially intended as slum upgrading for the residents of Kibera, but led to the displacement of hundreds of slum dwellers and is unaffordable for Nairobi’s urban poor today, fuelling residents’ fears of comparative government initiatives (Omenya and Huchzermeyer 2006). Together, these measures have reduced the size of Kibera from 550 acres in 1971 to 300 acres in 2010 (ibid., 103; Médard 2010, 39). Furthermore, governments have largely neglected the settlement in terms of urban service provision (ibid.).

While this approach to the settlement has had a deep and enduring impact on the social and material structures of the slum, it did not result in depopulation. On the contrary, the perpetual exceptionality of Kibera has been conducive to its status as one of the world’s most densely populated shack settlements, while at the same time representing one of most valuable opportunities for Kenya’s central Government for real estate development and for the demonstration of the Government’s ability to provide modern urban housing.

### ***Dynamics of violent in/formalization***

Today, Kibera’s residents mostly rent single rooms in shacks of corrugated iron sheets, wood, or mud with iron roofs (Mitullah 2002, 12). A building may accommodate two or up to 40 rooms under one roof, constructed back to back in parallel rows. In 2002 the average 10 m<sup>2</sup> rooms housed families of approximately five (ibid.). Due to struggles over landownership, vested interests and intimidation by local chiefs, who represent the lowest

level of formal administration in Kenya and who control any change in the built structure of Kibera; as well as technological difficulties resulting from the structure of built space, the utility company does not connect shacks to running water (cf. COHRE 2006). Therefore people rely on communal water kiosks, showers and toilets where services are supplied at exorbitant costs<sup>2</sup>, or they have to resort to “flying toilets”, the defecation into plastic bags. The narrow spaces between buildings serve as paths, as drains and for other activities outside the home. This superimposition of uses is characteristic of Kibera. Rooms are simultaneously living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, dining rooms and often shops. The railway line passing through Kibera is at the same time one of the largest marketplaces of the settlement and a pedestrian walkway. Seasonal streams and rivers are walkways and drains, workshops double up as churches and meeting rooms. The direct adjacency of this complex and highly efficient overlay of uses in an intensely built-up space and the generous and monotonous green of the neighbouring golf course give an impression of the drastic fragmentation of Nairobi. In official maps, the extremely dense area that is Kibera has appeared as green space or forest until roughly a decade ago. It was only in the beginning of the 2000s that the government started to recognize the settlement formally and to provide basic infrastructures such as water and electricity (UN-Habitat and ROK 2003). However, before government officials formally recognized the existence of Kibera and its permanence in the beginning of the 2000s, authorities in different levels of the state hierarchy were always deeply entangled with the settlement

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<sup>2</sup> My conversation in Kibera and with the Nairobi Water and Sewage Company since 2005 indicate that the engagement of the utility in the provision of water through communal kiosks since the beginning of the 2000s has led to greater availability of water in some villages of Kibera, while the prices have remained roughly the same (3-10 Kenya Shilling /201). Thus, affordability and not availability is the greatest hindrance to access to water in these parts of the settlement.

and have remained so. These entanglements reach from strategies of redevelopment and disconnection of services, alongside the informal ownership of huts by government officials to the organization of informal housing markets by local chiefs, who control the building structures of the houses. Until today, they exert immense pressure on residents and try to ensure that no permanent structures, i.e. houses made of cement or stone are built (Kariah-Gitau, Mitullah, and Syagga 2001; COHRE 2006, own interviews). This is why the housing structures of this slum are not gradually becoming more permanent. These living conditions subject the slum's inhabitants to social tensions and violence. This was the case during the rent wars in Nairobi when slum dwellers' protests against informal 'structure owners' led to violent conflicts in Kibera in 2001, after Moi, then president, questioned the owners' legitimacy in a public speech (Goux 2003). Outbreaks of violence in Kibera and other settlements of Nairobi in the wake of the 2007 elections, when the presidential aspirant Raila Odinga promised rent controls, are more recent manifestations of the social tensions in Kibera. They furthermore demonstrate the ways in which politicians are able to set people against each other in accordance with their political calculations (Huchzermeyer 2011).

Actors deliberately in/formalize Kibera, often to reach political goals, e.g. by removing it from some maps and including it on others, simultaneously connecting parts of it to municipal services and disconnecting others, or tolerating temporary built structures and a range of activities not in accordance with formal standards. Informality does not accidentally occur outside the state, but state actors on different levels – along with urban actors outside the state – produce this extra-legal space (cf. Roy 2009). Kibera's is a "gray" area (cf. Yiftachel 2009) where state actors and residents constantly act outside formal legislation and the particular informal rules these actors follow render it a unique place in Nairobi. Despite its notorious lack of basic services and its social

tensions it is a place of possibility not only for people who look for a place to live and work in the city, for ‘structure owners’ who profit from the status quo, but also for state officials, who strive for modern urban development.

### **The KENSUP in Kibera – re-ordering the slum from above**

The pilot project of the Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme (KENSUP) in Soweto East village began with a Memorandum of Understanding between UN-Habitat and the Government of Kenya to cooperate in the KENSUP with the goal “to improve the livelihoods of people living and working in slums and informal settlements in the urban areas of Kenya [...]” (UN-Habitat and ROK 2003: 2). A range of activities has been carried out in line with these goals: participatory mapping, participatory enumerations of slum dwellers with the issuing of enumeration cards, the installation of community participation organisations and housing cooperatives (figure 2).

This project design was in line with the participatory slum upgrading paradigm, based on a notion of “slum” as an urban space that is in many ways deficient but persistent, and which consequently needs to be accepted and changed from within, taking into account the diverse needs, livelihoods and struggles for resources and power of residents (UN-Habitat 2003). However, a series of incidents demonstrate how project officials, slum dwellers and other actors have appropriated the KENSUP in Soweto East in a way that undermines the re-ordering of the slum as officially envisioned by the project (cf. table 1).



Figure 2. Participatory mapping in Soweto East (author, 2005).

Table 1.: Main events KENSUP project in Soweto East

2003	MoU between Government of Kenya and UN-Habitat to collaborate in the Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme (KENSUP);
2005	socio-economic and physical mapping of Soweto East, issuing of enumeration cards;
2005	Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Urban Development (MoLHU ) creates cooperatives and some slum dwellers start saving for the housing in Soweto East;
2007	Ministry of Lands issues Master Plan for Soweto East;
2007	Construction of a road in Soweto East and a decanting site for the temporary relocation during stepwise reconstructions of Kibera;
2009	People move into the decanting site for a “service fee” of 21 USD/month <sup>3</sup> ; start of construction of housing estate in Soweto East Zone A;
2011	Installation of pre-paid electricity meters in the decanting site, i.e. “externalization” of electricity costs from “service fee”;
2013	Cooperative announces minimum savings of 1481 USD (10% total cost) required to move into the Soweto East Zone A housing estate;

<sup>3</sup> Change rate from Kenyan Shilling according to

<https://bankenverband.de/service/waehrungsrechner/> on September 15, 2016

2014	Relocation into the Soweto East Zone A housing estate scheduled but delayed due to disputes over potential dwellers;
Spring 2016	Relocation into the Soweto East Zone A housing estate not yet accomplished

***Participatory upgrading disrupted***

The Settlement Executive Committee (SEC) serves as a link between the slum dwellers, UN-Habitat and the executing organisation, the Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Urban Development (MoLHU). The SEC has a difficult task. This is due to the extreme diversity of economic and family situations, positions in the complex social hierarchies and networks within and outside the settlement, as well as interests in upgrading projects in Soweto East, which renders the identification, let alone representation, of any common interest among the slum dwellers extremely demanding. Given these complications, the low number of representatives in the SEC, where 15,000–50,000 people have consistently been represented by only 15, and the lack of provisions for re-elections of members put this organisation at risk of developing its own life and distancing itself from broader communal interests. Indeed, some members of community participatory organisations have remained in their position for more than ten years and some have reportedly engaged in fraud, undermining elections by assigning positions to themselves and helping people from outside Soweto East and particularly state officials to acquire fake enumeration cards or to directly buy themselves into the project’s housing units (Interviews SEC members 2005/2015; *IRIN News*, June 5, 2010). According to one of my interlocutors they did not only accept bribes but they also threatened those members of the SEC who refused to do so and maligned them in front of high-ranking officials from the MoLHU (Interview 2015).

The difficulties of re-ordering the settlement within a top-down project furthermore became manifest in the struggle for access to housing cooperatives. The cooperatives were set up by the Ministry of Housing in 2005 to mobilize the financial means of slum dwellers, with which the Government expected to cover up to one-fifth of the project costs in the form of mortgage payments (ROK 2005, 12). A poster that hung in the UN-Habitat office in Kibera in 2014 further clarifies the rationality of the Government and UN-Habitat. It cites de Soto's "mystery of capital"<sup>4</sup>:

"The poor already possess the assets they need to make a success of capitalism, but these assets are dead capital, held in defective forms: houses built on land whose ownership rights are not adequately recorded [...]." (KENSUP poster, no date)

The text on the poster goes on: "[...] through the co-operative movement the slum dwellers can borrow funds and increase their investment." The use of de Soto's argument is revealing as most slum dwellers in Kibera are tenants. Cooperatives are a particular tool to regulate housing markets in upgrading projects. However, their potential contribution within the KENSUP to an improvement of the lives of any of Kibera's residents was called into question by the decision to allow absentee 'structure owners' to save within the cooperatives (ROK 2005, 12). Absentee 'structure owners' are central but elusive figures in the slums of Nairobi. Some were found to have close connections to, or be part of, Kenya's political elite, but they remain literally absent and communicate through intermediaries (Kariah-Gitau, Mitullah, and Syagga 2001). They are mysterious

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<sup>4</sup> In his influential book, de Soto (2000) argues that the success of capitalism in the West depends on the formalization of assets. For example, the documentation of a house in a formal property system allows the house owner to ascribe a certain value to his house, trade it, make profit and potentially become rich.

figures operating in the background, who may own hundreds of shacks and whose profit may largely equal their income as they hardly invest in the area or maintain their stock. They can guard their particular interests against any conceivable public interest – earlier slum upgrading initiatives in Nairobi illustrate structure-owners’ power to sabotage projects that threaten their status (Djafari and Konukiewitz 2001). Their inclusion in the cooperatives made clear that their “quasi-legal” (Majale 2002: 274) status could not simply be ignored. According to Majale (ibid), this “quasi-legal” status exists, as government actors on different levels tolerate the construction and letting of shacks, and owners have relative security due to informal contracts with local chiefs – even though there is now law legalising it – or through the granting of “Temporary Occupation Licenses” by the local administrations. The inclusion of “structure owners” has transformed the cooperative into a vehicle to legalize the ‘structure owners’ status. With absentee landlords, people from Soweto East and the decanting site saving in the cooperative, the applicants for housing far outnumber the units available (cf. Interviews with residents and SEC members 2014/2015). These events illustrate the disruptions and changes that the participatory slum upgrading paradigm has gone through in the course of the project. In particular, the attempt to order the slum by making its population visible via counting, mapping and enumeration cards has instantly failed, as some state actors and some residents of Kibera took part in the trading of the cards and buying of people into the decanting site (ibid., *IRIN News*, June 5, 2010).

### ***A disputed urban form***

The housing design chosen within KENSUP represents a break with the project’s initial goal to improve the slum dwellers’ lives. A section of Soweto East no longer consists of the intricate system of shacks Kibera is emblematic for (Figure 3). The newly built

structures in Soweto East Zone A as well as the decanting site, walled estates of multi-story blocks, reflect imaginations of an orderly city, where urban dwellers live in flats with individual connections to city-wide infrastructure networks operated and maintained by an urban utility provider. The design hardly differs from that of other estates in Nairobi, such as Nyayo high-rise, which was originally designed as a home-ownership project, but where many inhabitants are tenants today and where monthly rents are about ten times as high as the official service fees in the decanting site<sup>5</sup>.

The design process was not transparent, even though a community design team had been put in place. A design team member remarks in 2014:

“The design for Zone A was not done according to the designs that the community came up with. [...] Where the new design came from is well known by the government and maybe some of the SEC members and not the community.”

The housing scheme has brought about discord among the Government of Kenya, UN-Habitat and community representatives. A member of the MoLHU argued in 2007 that the high population density of Kibera renders such a radical reconstruction the only viable option for upgrading. A UN-Habitat staff member interviewed in 2007 believes that no sustainable financing mechanisms are in place, which would make these relatively upmarket structures applicable for slum upgrading catering the urban poor. As Huchzermeyer (2011a: 159) points out, this stance of UN-Habitat toward the housing scheme has only emerged in the course of the project – till 2007, some of its branches involved in the project were supportive of the modern housing design before official

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<sup>5</sup> In the decanting site the “service fee” is 21 USD/month in 2015, in KENSUP housing Zone A the contribution for a three-room flat is 20 USD/month in the cooperative rent-to-buy scheme, and in Nyayo high-rise three rooms cost around 200 USD/month in the informal housing market in 2015.

statements were issued in 2008 clarifying the position of UN-Habitat against such schemes that hardly benefit the urban poor. However, the idea of modern urban living represented by the project's housing estates is not only prevalent among government architects and planners and some UN-Habitat staff. On the contrary, the KENSUP community design team had created a design with even larger flats than those currently under construction. This design had taken into account the KENSUP housing approach for Soweto East, which included the subletting of rooms within a flat as a tool for people to generate income to pay the rent of the decanting site and to save money for the rent-to-buy scheme of the housing in Zone A (MoH 2005). Thus, according to the original plans, one family would share one room and two or three families a flat. Still, the highly densified housing scheme that has been constructed hardly provides enough space for all those who were displaced by the project to date. The buildings' modern style, their close distance to Nairobi's CBD, as well as the minimal absolute amount of subsidized housing in the city, where about 60% of the population lives as tenants in shacks, make them "leapfrog" the city's housing ladder (Huchzermeyer 2008). Thus, gentrification is the most probable outcome of this intervention.

In short, Kibera's particular material structures and the vested and partly irreconcilable interests of diverse actors, and its role in the city's dynamics of uneven

resource distribution pose great challenges to any upgrading project for the urban poor.



Figure 3. KENSUP housing Zone A behind Kibera's shacks (author, 2015).

### **Life in the decanting site – expectations and situations in a decaying estate**

The project induced changes in built space as well as the socio-material living conditions of people who moved to the decanting site. Completed in 2009, this estate has promised the modern urban life that people within and outside of Kibera strive for. However, the poor construction, lack of maintenance and the stepwise disconnection from municipal services bring the estate closer to the slum which some inhabitants have been so eager to leave behind.

### ***Every-day struggles in the estate***

Today, the decanting site is a busy, lively quarter, where people sell groceries and offer services not only in the parts of the buildings designed as shops but also on balconies of the ground floor and from self-made stalls outside the buildings (figure 4). The housing

blocks carry signs of intense use and decay, which indicate that far more than the official 1900 people live in the 600 units of the site. Six years after completion, the buildings' stairs to the lower floors are worn out to such a degree that single steps are hardly recognizable. Due to population pressure and poor construction, sewage regularly blocks pipes and flows openly. Solid waste is scattered between the buildings, as the government has stopped paying the youth group that won the tender for waste management in the estate in August 2014. According to original designs, all flats are connected to water supply and electricity from the utilities. For water, people pay a flat rate of 2 USD/month included in the 21 USD service fee. According to contractual arrangements, the utility is to provide the settlement with water weekly. People store the water in 500L tanks on the roof so there is water in the taps, and additionally in other containers to make sure the water suffices throughout the week. This adds up to a consumption of slightly more than 2m<sup>3</sup> per household and month. Water in the decanting site is only marginally cheaper than in the slum of Kibera, where people pay roughly 1,5-5 USD per m<sup>3</sup> and almost four times as expensive as the water provided through household connections by the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company at 0,26 USD/m<sup>3</sup>. However, in August 2014 the utility stopped supply of the settlement, as the government had not paid water bills and accumulated arrears of 39,500 USD according to a member of the SEC (Interview in 2014). Since then, the inhabitants of the decanting site fetch water from the neighbouring slum, which is not only financially straining especially for those tenants who regularly pay the service fee, but also time consuming, physically stressful and it exposes the inhabitants of the decanting site, like slum dwellers, to the risk of water borne diseases. Furthermore, it contradicts peoples' expectations concerning standards of living in formal public housing as opposed to slum life. Consequently a former resident of Soweto East is

discontented with the living conditions in the decanting site, which he likens to those of the slum: “It is dirty here! It is the same as before, just in flats.” (Interview 2014)

Electricity is the only functioning service in the estate. Initially, the electricity bills were included in the rent, but as this allegedly led to excessive electricity consumption by some households, a pre-paid system was installed in 2011. In this regard people from Soweto East experience a change from their former illegal electricity connections. However, with the failing water supply and pre-paid electricity more than doubling the monthly payments of 21 USD for families in single units, life in the decanting site has become increasingly expensive since 2009 and was clearly beyond the budget of the urban poor in 2014.

An important change for those families, who are able to live in three-room units by themselves, is the additional space. This arrangement is not in accord with the original allocation, which was one household per room, but some people were able to secure entire flats for their families depending on their financial means and personal networks.

“Now at least I have space, you see: here I can put things and I have a kitchen and you see the children have space to move around.”

says a resident who moved with her two children from Soweto East into a three room flat in the decanting site. But space is rare in the decanting site where people with enumeration cards make profits from subletting rooms to families and most families live in single rooms. The subletting of rooms within a flat was part of the KENSUP housing approach for Soweto East from the beginning (MoH 2005). The modalities of sharing a kitchen and a bathroom are the subject of constant negotiations and regular fights among residents. Philip, who was responsible for allocating the flats and settling disputes in the decanting site, explains how people accuse each other of “stealing flour” or failing to clean the bathroom. According to him, there is less privacy in the shared flats compared to the

shacks of Kibera, where most families had their own cooking place. The contestations within flats also travel beyond their poorly constructed walls, informing people about their neighbours' situations. Hanna explains that this is the case especially during fights, when people regularly overhear neighbours threatening to kick their cohabitants out of the flat or to denounce them as illegal residents in the decanting site. However, my interlocutors agree that the enhanced security of this gated estate where one does not have to leave the flat in order to go to the toilet, is a key advantage.



Figure 4. Shop and stalls in the decanting site (author, 2014).

### *Porous and fixed boundaries between the estate and the slum*

The decay of buildings in the decanting site and the lack of water and waste services have a particular effect on its inhabitants. Living in the flats has a symbolic meaning inscribed

into the materiality of the multi-story housing. “We have housing; we do not live in shacks anymore”, describes Francis the changes of life in the decanting site for former slum dwellers in 2014. To have housing as opposed to live in a shack means not only a change in the built structure, but it brings with it the entitlement to certain services. KENSUP has created new mental and material boundaries. People explicitly distinguish the decanting site from the slum Kibera. A sentence Hanna and other former inhabitants of Soweto East have uttered repeatedly is that living in the decanting site means to have “changed life”, to have improved their status from someone who lives in a slum to someone who lives in a multi-story building with household connections to water and sewerage as well as electricity.

This difference is also manifest in concrete physical boundaries. From balconies in the housing estate facing North-East, the neighbouring shacks of Kibera are clearly visible, but since 2014 they are separated by a highway, the southern bypass of Nairobi. This bypass prohibits direct access from the decanting site to the slum and the journey takes a good 30 minute *matatu* ride in off-peak hours. However, the defunct service provision, the failure to meet the expectations of living standards, which the particular materiality of the built structures in the decanting site evoke, frustrates some peoples’ desire to mark a difference between being a slum dweller and a modern citizen outside the slum. The lack of clean water provision challenges the boundaries between slum and decanting site not only mentally but also in a very concrete way, as the inhabitants of the site have to fetch water from vendors in the slum. On the other hand, for those who live in Soweto East, the decanting site and the Zone A housing estate remain remote and inaccessible due to high costs and non-transparent allocation procedures. Thus, the boundary between slum and decanting site appears porous only in one direction, toward the slum. The apparent dissociation between intention and outcome of state-led activities

with the stepwise disconnection of the decanting site from networked urban services, and the disputes among inhabitants once more demonstrate the immense difficulties to realize the project of modernity for poor households in Nairobi.

### **People's strategies between distance and proximity**

In order to cope with life in the slum and particularly with the changes induced by the KENSUP project, people link up with other people or break linkages; they create relations and networks, which are carefully calibrated between autonomy and engagement. I focus on the accounts of three (former) slum dwellers who find different ways to balance distance and proximity concerning the slum, the upgrading project as well as the city as a whole in order to achieve their individual goals. All of them were long-term residents of Soweto East before two of them moved to the decanting site in 2009 and the third moved to another shack in Soweto East as the place she had rented before was demolished as part of the project.

### ***The slum: loose and close socio-material ties***

As the decanting site decays, its inhabitants are forced to maintain ties with the slum as they access water. Beyond that, people keep different degrees of proximity or distance. Philip lives in the decanting site, but works elsewhere and attempts to cut ties with the slum, which he hardly ever visits anymore since he moved away from Soweto East. Lydia on the other hand had lived in Soweto East Zone A until the housing was constructed. She did not move to the decanting site but stayed in Kibera, where she had to find a new home after her house had been demolished for the new estate. She does not only live in the slum, but also sends her children to school there and is a member of a community based organization. Her ties with the settlement are intense – she accounts how her stepfather “saved” her by taking her to Kibera as a youth where she went to school instead

of working on her family's fields upcountry. Decades later, when she was displaced by the Zone A constructions and her rent one of the slum's shacks had almost tripled, her close socio-material ties within the village have enabled her to cope with the stress the project has induced. She explains how a person with whom she had done community work helped her out financially:

“I told him, the houses were brought down, my properties are outside I do not even have a place to sleep, so I am requesting so that he can assist me with money for paying rent, even for one month. [...] So the following day he sent me 2,000 shillings.”

However, being at the receiving end of such acts of generosity has not been easy for her. She felt “stigmatized” at times when she was forced to ask others for help to provide food, shelter and education for her children. Accordingly, while life in Kibera has opened up possibilities she might not have been able to access elsewhere, she does not wish to stay in the slum. If she had the means to invest, she would not do so in Kibera, but use them to start a future elsewhere. This perceived temporality of her stay in Kibera does not make her neglect her ties with it – she is intensely involved with the community.

Hanna, a former village elder of Soweto East, managed to “change her life” by getting an enumeration card and moving from a rented shack in Soweto East with no running water, no sanitary facilities, and only informal power connections to a flat with toilets, pre-paid electricity and up until mid-2014 also running water in the decanting site (figures 5-7). Her ability to reserve an entire flat for her family demonstrate her financial means as well as her personal networks and role within the KENSUP. However, her networks overcome the physical and mental boundaries separating the decanting site from the slum Kibera. Firstly, she still generates her family's income from selling household goods and vegetables in a shop at the railway line in Soweto East. Furthermore, she

supports her friend Susan, who holds an enumeration card, but continues to live in Soweto East village due to financial problems and is not able to cover her daily expenses in the slum through her job as a household help in Soweto East, with regular donations of food and money. Susan herself does not rely on Hanna alone as her situation is growing increasingly tense in the wake of KENSUP, which led to drastic rent increases in the parts of the slum adjacent to the housing estate. She has other friends, “well-wishers”, the church and a HIV positive support group to provide her with rent money, food or sanitary facilities as she cannot afford to use the communal sanitation blocks all the time. For Hanna changing her life to live in an apartment outside the slum does not mean cutting ties with it. On the contrary, her intense engagement within the slum strengthens her central position as one of a beneficiary of the project and a future inhabitant of the Soweto East Zone A housing block she wants to move into with her family.



Figure 5. Hanna in Soweto East (author, 2007).



Figure 6. Hanna in front of her new flat in the decanting site (author, 2014).



Figure 7. Picture of Hanna and Raila Odinga on her wall (author, 2015).

*The project: Careful calibration of engagement or autonomy*

Hanna maintains intense ties with the KENSUP. As a former village elder she takes an active part as a member of the cooperative and the SEC. She is also the women's representative in the local branch for the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy, the party headed by Raila Odinga, who from 2008 to 2013 was the Prime Minister of Kenya. He recruits votes from Kibera and as the constituency's Member of Parliament till 2013 he has been a key figure of the KENSUP in Soweto East (Fernandez and Calas 2011). Thus, Hanna has agency in the KENSUP and she actively shapes the course of events through her intense social networks. Her position with regards to the project becomes apparent as she discusses the threat of state officials infiltrating the project. She says: "I know the government is jealous, but we say no!" She goes on to explain how people with an enumeration card but without financial means to move into the decanting site or save in the cooperative would rather have a family member pay through their card than sell it to government people or other people who are not official beneficiaries of the project. She adds that if "the government brings people [to live in the decanting site], we can chase them [out]." These statements underline Hanna's stake in this project as someone who is not subject to the decisions of others, but who actively shapes them.

Lydia on the other hand does not engage in KENSUP but opposes it as she finds it "problematic" as it will not "alleviate the slum problem in Nairobi". She keeps a strategic distance from the project that allows her to know about its proceedings without being involved in it herself. Her options to actively participate in the KENSUP appear as reduced as those of anyone who lacks financial resources. She explains that she feels a responsibility to take care of herself and of her children, and that acting responsible means not to save with the cooperative. Referring to her sons she explains:

“I’m having the boys; I don’t even have a plot [...]. How can I buy a house for one million? Then I said I rather go and buy somewhere else than this upgrading.”

While her resources are in fact restricted and her options are limited, she is not powerlessly subjected to external pressures. For her it is a rational, “informed choice” to stay in the slum and wait for better options to change her life in the future. She keeps a strategic distance from the project that allows her to know about its proceedings without being involved herself.

Philip in turn was intensely involved with KENSUP and even though he did not live in Soweto East Zone A, he moved to the decanting site in order to fulfil his obligations within the project. As the youth representative of the SEC and the manager of the site, he was responsible for the allocation of flats and the settling of disputes among inhabitants. These tasks exposed him to increasing pressure to accept bribes and frustration as his proposals in the project were ignored by official planners. Eventually he resigned from his positions within the project. Nonetheless, he is saving money to be eligible for the Zone A housing. However, he does not save within the cooperative as he does not trust that his money would be safe there. Philip carefully balances his engagement in the project. He attempts to reach an ideal degree of autonomy allowing him to keep the option to profit from the housing and to strategically manage his resources. He saw himself subjected to threats by fellow SEC members as well as non-transparent and inconsistent activities of the government as he refused to follow the internal and informal rules of the KENSUP project while actively engaging in it. As this made him a dangerous figure for those who make these rules that often openly contradict formal legislation, he firmly experienced the insecurity and uncertainty of state actors’ arbitrary activities and also the violence this top-down project induces among slum dwellers. His distance from the project is strategic insofar as it prevents him from being

stuck in a relation that loses its functionality. His critique of those who engage intensely with Raila Odinga during his mandate was as follows, “I asked them: how do you push now Raila is in power? Do you see a situation where he is not in power?” This resonates with Simone’s description of youth, who face the challenge of keeping their relations tight enough to still be part of the network but at the same time sufficiently loose in order to stay “open to new alliances, sources of information and opportunities” (Simone 2005, 519).

In sum, Lydia, Hanna and Philip follow different strategies concerning their engagement in Soweto East or the project. They balance distance and proximity, from positioning themselves at the centre of social relations in Soweto East and KENSUP, to keeping a distance from the project while maintaining close ties to the village or staying at the edge of both in order to be able to jump in once it appears possible and beneficial.

### ***The city: between an intermediate place and a permanent residence***

Hanna, Lydia and Philip do not see their or their children’s future in Nairobi. For all three of them, the city fulfils a specific function for one moment in time; it is a place they pass through, but by no means a place any of them want to settle down in. Lydia has spent almost her entire life in Soweto East, but she sees her and her children’s future outside the city. She cannot afford to save with the housing cooperative, but if she was able to save money, she would rather try to get land outside Nairobi. Hanna and Philip grew up in Kibera but they are no longer slum dwellers; in 2009 they moved from a shack in Soweto East to a flat in the decanting site. However, this change does not keep them from further projecting their future elsewhere. Hanna owns a plot outside Nairobi and currently she saves not only within the cooperative but also by herself to build her own house upcountry where she ultimately wants to live. While Philip’s family lives in the decanting

site, he is not content and wishes to move elsewhere in Nairobi in the medium term. In terms of a longer term perspective, he wishes to live in his family's home, Nyanza, where he owns a house. He explains:

“Normally in Kenya, we live in the city just for work and when I grow old, I would like to live peacefully in my rural area in Nyanza [...].”

Not only the slum, but also the decanting site and the Zone A housing estate do not qualify as places where any of the three would like to settle down. Rather, they all typify the strong rural-urban linkages of Nairobi's slums, where 60% of the inhabitants own property and 55% own a house in rural areas (World Bank 2006). In Lydia's case the urban-rural linkages are less material than imagined. Her life in Nairobi is “perpetually incomplete” (Kihato 2013), as she does not have the means to save for a living elsewhere but still hopes for her and her children's life to change one day. Hanna and Philip have improved their lives as they moved into a flat in the decanting site, but they keep waiting, preparing for yet another change, which their circumstances currently restrict them to proceed to. Lydia's situation shows once again how the long term financial commitment that KENSUP requires does not fit with the uncertain future and unstable income of most people in slums.

More importantly, for Lydia, Philip and Hanna, the housing provision of KENSUP does not change the status of their residence in the city as one that is permanently temporary, a stepping stone to a better future elsewhere. The temporary function of not only the slum, but also the housing poses some fundamental questions to those urban planners who base their interventions on de Soto's ideas, as slum dwellers do not necessarily see the slum, or indeed the city as a whole, as the place where they would want to invest any, or part of, their potential capital.

## **Conclusion**

The KENSUP project in Kibera is in line with earlier top-down interventions in the settlement's history, with state actors shifting the boundaries of the formal and the informal and at the same time acting inside and outside these shifting boundaries. The project exemplifies the breaks, displacements and disruptions that shape the translation of the modernist urban dream in Nairobi, which urban planners, politicians, as well as urban denizens hold tight to so stubbornly.

My interviews and conversations with residents of Soweto East and the decanting site, as well as members of KENSUP community organs in Kibera suggest that people within and outside of the slum retain agency by their strategic positioning in centres or at the edges of socio-material networks providing food, information and money for each other. These networks are often long-term, as people reside in the settlement for long and indefinite periods even if they see it as a stepping stone to a future elsewhere. While there are numerous instances where people in and around Kibera help others who are in need, KENSUP and its participatory organisations apparently do not provide a platform for collective action, nor does it serve people to define or strive for any broader goal that they try to reach together with their often long-term neighbours and kin. Rather, the way people appropriate the project and adapt to the changes it has induced in and beyond Kibera, is shaped by struggles of interests between and within different groups. Using each other "as infrastructure" (Simone 2004), people engage in various transactions with state officials, according to their diverse interests. In doing so, some slum dwellers do and some do not represent collective goals, and some employ violence against others.

All these activities, negotiations and struggles are piecemeal and yet drastically change the materiality of every-day lives of Kibera's residents and stabilize the dynamics of uneven resource distribution in Nairobi. Furthermore, people within and outside the

slum radically transform imaginations of modern urban socio-spatial order inherent to the upgrading project. Through their networks as well as their autonomy, people enlarge their minimal room for manoeuvre, they carve out possibilities for a better future, circumventing, changing or making use of the ongoing top-down interventions. Concerning broader issues of urban governance in Africa and beyond, these transactions, networks and uneven power relations within and outside the slum as well as state institutions call into question not only existing practices of top-down housing production, but also the paradigm of participatory slum upgrading. The appropriation of this paradigm in the KENSUP project in Kibera, where it has been used in official documents and where some measures have been taken that are in accord with it, reveals how planning models travel and produce drastically different outcomes when mobilized in different contexts and the breaks that may shape the appropriation of planning models and paradigms, the disruptions and displacements it may cause, and the violence it may trigger in a place that is shaped by struggles of interests between and within different groups, where there is hardly any conceivable collective action.

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