

The Role of Social Capital in Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods in Urban Informal Settlements in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social capital in sustaining livelihoods among residents of slums in Kenya. The focus is on Kibera, the largest informal settlement in the country, characterized by rapid urbanization and various socio-economic challenges. Understanding social dynamics in slums is essential, as 75% of Kenya's urban growth occurs in informal settlements, and 60% of Nairobi's population lives in slums. The study analyzed different forms of social capital available to slum residents, explored its contribution to sustainable livelihoods, identified socio-cultural barriers to its development, and examined coping strategies employed by residents. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were gathered from 100 households through structured interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. Findings showed that 90% of respondents participated in social groups that provided financial support, social networks, and vocational training. However, economic disparities, lack of trust, and high unemployment rates posed significant challenges to the effectiveness of these groups. The study underscores the importance of social capital in managing socio-economic pressures in urban settings, fostering community resilience and cohesion. Without access to these networks, households face substantial difficulties and often resort to negative coping mechanisms. This research emphasizes the need to enhance social capital as a pathway toward sustainable livelihoods in urban informal settlements.

Keywords: Social Capital, Urbanization, Informal Settlements, Livelihoods, Community Resilience, Socioeconomic Challenges

Introduction

In developing countries, urbanization has been occurring at an alarming rate. This is evident in cities where the urban population has been rising. Consequently, there has been a rapid increase in urban population driven by the movement of rural residents to cities. This situation results from limited job opportunities in rural areas compared to urban areas, where employment prospects are higher, along with natural urban population growth (Palmer, 2024). Urbanization is particularly prevalent in Africa and South Asia. The urbanization rate in Sub-Saharan Africa stands at 41.8%, which threatens the socio-economic livelihoods of urban residents (Combes et al., 2023). Urbanization has led to competition for scarce resources such as land, housing, education, healthcare, and limited job opportunities. Additionally, the growth of urban populations significantly contributes to the expansion of slum areas, as poor rural migrants seek better livelihoods in cities. Further, rapid urbanization and increased population in the urban area, also create a deficit for the housing opportunities. Inadequate housing coupled with limited resources in urban areas has currently led to the proliferation of slums settlements where the costs of erecting houses and rent charges is low and convenient for the low-income earners. Therefore, From the housing perspective, flood resilience would rely on urban design, planning and infrastructure provision (Diarte et al., 2020). This creates increased competition for limited resources like housing, jobs, education, and social networks.

The limitation of the social and economic resources in the urban areas due to urbanization pushes the urban population to urban informal settlements. With time, the socio-economic resources in the urban area are either depleted or reduced to a minimum, thus failing to support the increased urban population. The increased urban population further affects the social capital due to the disintegration of the population in urbanization, where they move to different areas in the city where they think that the opportunities are broader.

In this study, the livelihood of the slum dwellers refers to the process of attaining the basic needs. There are various ways in which the urban dwellers meet their basic needs. Sen (1981) denoted that the urban dwellers purchase, donations and transfers, production, payment of kind, and even stealing. However, in urban environment, urban dwellers rely more on purchases rather than production like rural dwellers to the scarcity of land.

The urban settlement has high monetary value especially in the livelihood of the urban dwellers. Everything they do depends on the monetary value they have. Agricultural, mineral cultivation, livestock rearing is limited. The social networks are limited, thus making it difficult to establish the role played by the social capital in ensuring sustainability of the livelihood of the urban slum population, which is heterogeneous. Urban slum areas are characterised by social exclusion which rarely aligns with social capital. The area is often perceived to have a high level of crimes, violence, drug abuse and extreme poverty. Pornchokchai (2003) noted that urban slums have heterogeneous populations among them, the immigrants, indigenous people, people who have been internally displaced due to poverty, among other social issues, and finally, other ethnic minorities like Nubians in Kibera slum.

This study focuses on Kenya, where 75% of the urban growth is absorbed by the informal settlements, whereas 60% of Nairobi residents live in the slums (Inyumbira, 2023). This study examines the role of social capital in sustainable livelihood for persons living in urban informal settlements, a case of Kibera slums, Kenya. Kibera slums have high level poverty (USD 39 per person per month) (Diarte et al., 2020).

As a result, the slum lacks the basic infrastructure and services including clean water, drainage system, waste collection, and electricity supply. The following objectives guided the study; analyze the different forms of social capital accessible to slum dwellers; investigate how social capital contributes to sustainable livelihoods; identify the socio-cultural barriers that impede the development of social capital and examine the coping strategies employed by slum dwellers to navigate the challenges associated with social capital.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The livelihood of people living in the urban slums is drawn from labour markets which is oriented to non-agricultural production, buying and selling as well as services which to some extent, influenced by the demand and supply (Farrington et al., 2002). This is attributed to the high prices of food, housing, and sanitation among other household necessities. They rely on cash in order to access food, water, sanitation, garbage disposal, and electricity, among other household needs. As a result, the urban slum dwellers need cash income to survive. Farrington et al. (2002) noted that the majority of the urban slum dwellers work in the urban informal sector, where they earn low incomes; thus, they have to undertake a variety of income-generating activities to survive. This makes the slum dwellers' livelihood vulnerable, especially when there is social, climate, or economic change. In such a situation, social capital becomes a valuable and critical resource for the poor urban households living in the slum (Farrington et al. 2002).

Social capital refers to networks of mutual support that exist within and between households, extended family, and communities, which people can mobilise to access loans, childcare, food, accommodation, and information about employment and other opportunities (Farrington et al. 2002). These networks are entrenched in three forms of social capital, which are bonding, bridging, and linking capitals (Aldrich et al. 2020). Bonding capital pertains to personal relationships that are founded on a shared sense of collective identity, including kinship ties, neighbourhood connections, and ethnic and cultural affiliations. Bridging capital involves people's links that stretch beyond a shared sense of identities, which tend to be used for common aims like colleagues in the workplace, whereas linking capital entails the relationships between individuals, groups, formal institutions, and systems such as security, education, governance, and the economy (Mpanje et al., 2022). Social capital is a valuable and critical resource for poor urban households, especially during times of crisis and socio-economic change.

Livelihood entails the collection of assets, abilities, and income-generating activities that are owned and acquired by individuals or families and that can be used to make a living and improve long-term living conditions (Guo et al., 2023). Sustainability of livelihood occurs when an individual can cope with and recover from shocks, whereas maintaining or enhancing the capabilities and assets to meet the present needs and benefit future generations without undermining the natural and social resources (Chambers & Conway 1992). Thus, a sustainable livelihood (SL) advocates for a framework that understands the goals, scope, and priorities of development aimed at improving the livelihood of the low-income urban slum dwellers (Ashley & Carney, 1999). According to the Department for International Development (2000), SLA framework is composed of five components: vulnerability contexts, livelihood assets, transforming structures and processes, livelihood strategies, and livelihood outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Social Capital Theory (SCT) refers to the collection of resources associated with a durable network of relationships that provide value to its members by facilitating access to social resources. Initially articulated by Bourdieu (1985), SCT defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition.” The core idea is that a network adds value for its members by granting them access to the social resources embedded within it (Bourdieu, 1985; Florin, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2003).

To cultivate these social networks, investment strategies focused on institutionalizing group relationships are essential, as they serve as reliable sources of benefits (Portes, 1998). Generally, social capital can be divided into two components: (a) the social relationships themselves, which enable individuals to access resources held by their connections, and (b) the quantity and quality of those resources. The theory highlights the significance of social relationships and the quality of shared resources within a network for achieving mutual advantages.

Methodology

Kibera slum is arguably the largest urban informal settlement in Kenya, with an approximate population of 250,500 people within an area of roughly 2.38 km² (Desgropes, A., & Taupin, S., 2012). It is highly densely populated. It is located in the west of Kenya’s capital city, and approximately 5 km from the Central Business Centre of Nairobi and neighbors Ngong River. It is served by the Mbagathi highway and a railway line from Nairobi town. It stretches from Ngumo estate to the Nyayo highrise. Its proximity to Central Business Centre, Nairobi and industrial areas makes it favourable for most of the unemployed and the low-income earners. Kibera Slum has four administrative locations which are Makina, Laini Saba, Mugumoini and Serangombe. The administrative locations are made up of 18 villages which are Makongeni, Mashimoni, Makina, Raila, Soweto East, Kianda, Lindi, Laini Saba, Kambi Muru, Silanga, Olympics, Toi Market, DC Village, Karanja, Ayany, Kisumu Ndogo, and Gatwekera. Notably, Ayany, Olympic, and Karanja Estates feature a mix of formal and informal areas, as a result they were excluded from this study. The villages share similar characteristics; their residents are characterized by substandard housing, overcrowding, and insecure land tenure. In addition, they lacked basic services like provision of water, waste management, blocked drainage, and inaccessible roads, insecurity, extreme poverty, electricity and unemployment. The slum was purposively selected because it is the largest urban informal settlement in Africa.

The study was conducted in seven villages which were Soweto 18%, Gatwikira 18% Makina 18%, Laini Saba 18%, Lindi 18% and Kisumu ndogo 12%. The villages were from the four administrative locations selected which were Serang’ombe location 52%, Makina 18%, Laini Saba 16% and Mugumo-ini (18%) which covers the largest part of Kibera Slum. All these locations fall in Kibera Division. Serang’ombe location covers the largest part of Kibera slum.

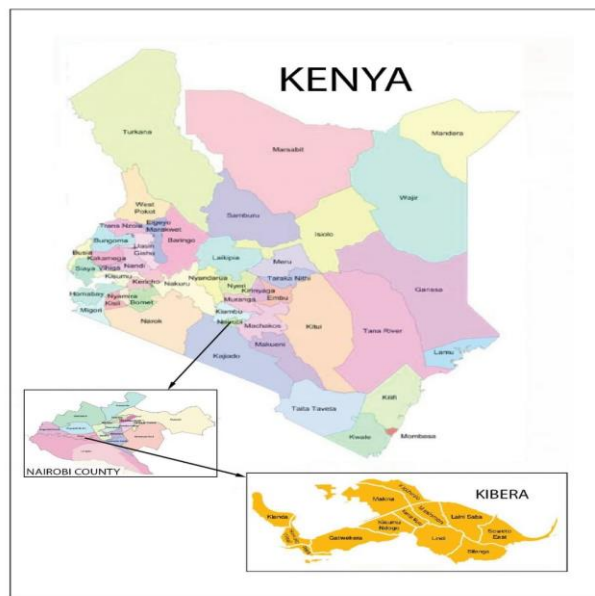


Figure 1: Map of the study area

Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were employed to gather primary data. The primary data was collected from the selected households in the Kibera slum. Secondary data was obtained from a range of sources that had information regarding the urban informal settlement.

Stratified sampling method was used to sample the households from four administrative locations in Kibera slum, where the household data was collected. The four administrative locations stratified in Kibera urban informal settlement were Kibera, Laini Saba, Mugumoini and Serangombe. Each of the administrative locations formed a stratum. A random selection of 25 households was conducted in each of the administrative locations, thus totalling to 100 households. The study conducted face-to-face interviews with the respondents who was the head of the household or an adult member who acted as the head of the household during the period of interview in a situation where the head of the household was absent. The data collected provided the information in the following areas: the types of social capital that the people living in the slums had access to, how social capital contributes to sustainable livelihoods among slum dwellers, and the coping strategies put in place to overcome the barriers that hinder access to social capital.

Key informant interviews were conducted with eight members using an interview guide. These members were the Chiefs in the four locations, a priest from Christ the King Catholic Church, and 3 chairladies from three merry-go-rounds located in Soweto East, Makina, Gatwekera, and Kisumu Ndogo villages.

Two focus group discussions were created, consisting of 8 members, that is 1 for male and 1 for female focus group discussions. The focus group discussions were conducted with community members in the study area. The selection of members of each group discussion was based on knowledge of the topic under study, and each member must have been living in Kibera slum for the last six years. This was to avoid people who had not lived long in the slum and hence could not participate effectively during the discussion. The researcher read the question, and the members in the group discussed it exhaustively. The interviews and discussions were undertaken in English. Members of the group understood and spoke English.

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS. The focus group discussion data was tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyse key informant data and focus group discussion data.

Findings and Discussion

Most of the respondents (62%) were female, while 38% were male. This could suggest that the male migration for work is quite common. This was further noted during the focus group discussion that;

It was not common to find men during the day because the majority usually go out for work, like masonry work, touting, in the bodaboda industry, watchmen at individual houses, among others. They are only available during the days they are off duty or when they fail to get a job.

The majority of the respondents were between 26-35 years (45%), 28% above 35 years, 24% between 19-25 years. The respondents who were 18 years and below were 3%. This showed that the majority of the respondents (69%) were within the productive age (19-35 years). This showed that there were some households that were headed by persons below 18 years. This was confirmed by one respondent who said:

Some households are headed by children due to factors like natural attrition of their parents, some of the parents leave the children to work as house-help, whereas they only come to see their children during their off days.

The study established that half of the respondents (50%) were people living on their own in the slum, while 39% were living with their parents, relatives, or friends. This is an aspect of social capital where people come together to reduce the cost of accommodation in the slum, vis-à-vis the household's livelihood. The households where the individuals were living alone were also attributed to the high cost of living, and therefore, they could not sustain their families in the slum. Some respondents had opted to leave their families in the rural areas. It was further noted that 47% of the respondents had lived for a period of more than 10 years in the slum, 1-5 years (29%), 6-10 years (20%), while the least (4%) had stayed in the area for a period less than one year. During the focus group discussion, one member said:

In comparison with other places, living in the slum is the best option because it is near work opportunities like in Nairobi Central Business District, Industrial area, and near Karen and Kilimani, which are high-end areas. Further, the rent in the slum is low and sustainable.

The marital status of the respondents was as follows: 63% were remarried, single (26%), separated (3%), and divorced or widowed (8%). Though a high number of people living in Kibera slum are married, respondents reported cases of families breaking down due to economic pressure. The common source of family disputes in the slums is usually experienced when the head of the household fails to meet the family's basic needs, especially food and housing.

The respondents' level of education was as follows: primary education (34%), secondary education (33%), tertiary college (16%), post-primary/secondary vocational training (9%), undergraduate degrees from local universities (5%), and with no formal or formal education (4%). The data is close to 2019 National statistics on literacy levels in Kenya, where more than 80% of the population living in informal/slum settlements across Kenya had generally low levels of education or low qualifications. This low qualification hindered them from accessing employment in the formal sector.

The study wanted to establish the status of employment among people living in Kibera slum. The respondents who were self-employed (22%), and the respondents employed were either in the public or private sector (23%). The majority of the respondents (55%) were unemployed. The unemployed included housewives, guardians, persons working in the informal sector, students in tertiary institutions, children who had completed primary and secondary schools, or students or children who had dropped out of school. In Kibera slum, job insecurity is still a real problem; most unemployed persons were engaged in work on a day-to-day basis. The self-employed persons engaged in economic activities such as cooking local food, mandazi, and chapatti for sale, selling vegetables, and fish.

The study wanted to establish the type of house built in the slum. Most of the houses in the slum were built with earth (69%), 18% from iron sheet; 3% on brick and 10% had stone walls. This meant that only 10% of the houses could be classified as permanent housing, as most of the houses were either temporary or semi-permanent. The majority (80%) were living in rental houses, with 60% living in single-roomed housing structures, which could be attributed to meagre incomes.

The study to establish the sources of water in the slums. Water is an essential commodity in the household. In the Kibera slum, water vendors form the primary source of water to most of the households (79%), whereas 6% accessed water from a public borehole. Only 15% of the households sampled had piped water. This is an indication that water affects the livelihood of people living in the slum in a great way.

The research indicated that in the Kibera slum, 45% of respondents utilized garbage collection services offered by private providers. In contrast, 40% of residents dispose of their waste at night in gullies and open spaces due to financial constraints preventing them from hiring a garbage service. Furthermore, 13% disposed of their household waste in nearby pit latrines, while merely 3% had access to waste disposal services from the Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company, which is tasked by the Nairobi City County to manage waste disposal.

In the Kibera slums, a significant portion of respondents (58%) reported having access to toilet facilities. Among those with access, 72% paid to use privately managed toilets. Only 23% utilized public toilet facilities, while 65% relied on their neighbors' toilets. For the 43% of respondents without any toilet access, the practice involved using plastic bags, which they disposed of at night by throwing them onto rooftops, a method known locally as “flying toilets.”

The study attempted to establish whether the household in the slum had electricity connectivity. Electricity connectivity is a key component in development of sustainable livelihood. The study revealed that 86% of the household were connected whereas, 15% were not. However, it was established during focus group discussion that over 50% of the household that had electricity connectivity were illegally connected. The reasons behind high illegal connectivity were low income in the household, high connection fee charged by Kenya Power and Lightening Company (KPLC) as it involved extension of the new power line network and lack of wayleaves. Also, the members of the FGD lamented of tedious connection procedures laid down by KPLC.

The study aimed to identify the types of social capital present in the urban slum. It found that 90% of respondents participated in a social group. A small percentage, however, were not involved due to financial constraints (68%), having recently moved to the area (12%), or a lack of interest (20%). Among those who were part of a social group, the majority (46%) belonged to at least two groups, while 40% were members

of only one. This suggests that urban slum residents are generally engaged in social groups, many of which are financially oriented, such as self-help groups, merry-go-rounds, and table banking. Additionally, there are religious focused groups, like small Christian communities, where members gather for spiritual support.

There are various reasons for individuals in the urban slum to join multiple social groups. One respondent noted that.

Membership carries certain risks due to the monetary contributions required on a weekly or monthly basis. Therefore, joining multiple groups serves as a risk diversification strategy; if one group fails, individuals have alternatives.

Membership in a social group typically requires some financial contribution, with 99% of respondents indicating they paid some form of fee. The frequency and number of contributions varied between groups. Notably, 57% of respondents reported making their contributions weekly during meetings, while 33% contributed monthly. This preference for groups that meet frequently was emphasized during focus group discussions where it was revealed.

Members of a group are for the groups that meet frequently, like once a month or once per month rather than quarterly, six months, or even annually, because it is easier to keep track of their group's contributions and achieve more as a group, rather than where meetings occur rarely.

The primary factor influencing an individual's decision to join a social group was their ability to afford the required contributions. A majority of respondents (52%) reported being able to make their contributions on time. Among those who struggled to pay, 37% managed to settle their contributions at the next group meeting, while 60% faced penalties within their groups. When members lacked the financial means to contribute, 29% sought assistance from family and relatives. Thus, group membership is viewed as an important safety net and a means of savings.

The social group network is essential for sustaining household livelihoods, a view shared by 97% of respondents. Social groups contribute to livelihoods in the urban slum through various mechanisms, including savings and investments (42%), access to credit services (21%), financing household needs via group investments (36%), and offering skills training in areas such as cooking and business management. In this context, the primary role of social capital is to foster sustainable livelihoods, which includes providing access to credit (52%), offering occupational and business skills (30%), and functioning as a safety net during instances of death, illness, or other any other form of social upheaval (18%). Consequently, social capital is essential for sustaining the livelihoods of urban households residing in slum environments.

The key determinants of social capital in urban slums encompass ethnicity, gender, income level, and the geographical distribution of community members. This social capital often emerges during periods of hardship, facilitating savings, access to credit, and investment opportunities. Although respondents recognize the necessity and advantages of belonging to a social group, they perceive a high rate of disintegration among these groups. Contributing factors include a lack of trust among community members (40%), economic disparities (46%), ethnic polarization (4%), and, to a lesser extent, age (10%). Currently, an individual's economic status significantly influences social capital dynamics.

In Kibera slum, borrowing and lending money among residents is a prevalent practice, serving as a coping mechanism for adverse shocks that impact individual livelihoods, such as illness, death, and unemployment.

Despite the potential benefits of utilizing social capital, all respondents (100%) reported a reluctance to borrow from individuals, fearing negative repercussions on their reputation if they are unable to repay within the agreed time frame. Instead, there is a preference for borrowing from social groups, where loans are secured against members' contributions, providing a safety net in case of default. However, this reliance on social groups has contributed to their disintegration. Respondents typically view borrowing from these groups as a last resort, particularly when the funds are intended not for economic advancement but to address urgent social challenges within the household. The study revealed that slightly more than half of the respondents would seek financial support from various sources: relatives and family (30%), friends (40%), employers (2%), neighbors (18%), and workmates (10%). Notably, the majority indicated a preference for seeking assistance from friends.

The study aimed to explore the relevance of social groups. During a focus group discussion, one participant remarked:

People join social groups to socialize, connect, and build friendships. These groups also address societal issues, such as security and infrastructure, like building roads. Being part of a social group offers security during social upheavals, such as death or illness, while also facilitating social activities like marriages. Social groups are essential as they create a safety net in challenging times; it's about having individuals who understand and support us. Moreover, these groups foster a sense of belonging and trust, which is crucial for social cohesion.

The study wanted to establish the reasons why people in the slums joined social group/s. Majority (80%) for economic interests like table banking, merry go round, 14% for socio-religious interests like to help manage social shocks such as death, illness, or unemployment, meetings for prayers and 6% did not have specific reason. The response is confirmed by Kwiringira, et al., (2023) who denoted that people in the slums joins groups for economic rationale and only a few people join social groups because of other ventures and initiatives which do not have a direct economic or capital benefit.

The study wanted to establish coping strategies, which people use in case of social shocks such as death, illness or dismissal from a job. 55% of the respondents said that people sought assistance from friends, relatives and neighbors and 34% borrows from banks (e-loans), shylocks, women *chamas*, 14% engages in illegal activities such as child labour, prostitution or stealing and the least 9% relocate to rural areas as potential solutions. During the focus group discussion, it was noted that.

In the area in case of death of a member in a household the neighbours usually converge to the deceased household to fundraise. The common way of fundraising is through “*disco matanga*”. Juma et al (2013) defines A *disco matanga* as a cultural funeral practice of the Luo in the Nyanza province. Disco Matanga is usually used to help raise money in order to help the family of the deceased offer a proper burial. This event usually starts with music playing and people are supposed to fundraise. During *disco matanga* people converge in the evening and sing while fundraising from the attendants. However, many families find themselves struggling alone to cope with these shocks, leading them to resort to borrowing or engaging in negative coping mechanisms. These include child labor—sending children after school to sell sweets, cabbage, Sukuma-wiki, or other greens—as well as involvement in antisocial behaviors. Such behaviors encompass prostitution, stripping in clubs, gambling, illegal businesses, or even crime (36%).

This situation underscores the critical importance of social groups in providing support and resources. It highlights the broader implications for social cohesion and community resilience, as the absence of these

networks can lead to detrimental outcomes for individuals and families, further destabilizing the community as a whole.

Conclusion

The study highlights the critical role of social capital in the lives of slum dwellers, particularly in Kibera. The findings revealed that a significant portion of the respondents (90%) were engaged in social groups, which served as vital networks for support, resource sharing, and community resilience. The networks were an important vehicle for facilitation of access to credit and savings, skills training, and social support, thereby contributing to sustainable livelihoods of the residents. The study identified challenges faced by households that did not have access to these networks which include lack of financial resources and safety net mechanisms, vulnerability to social shocks such as illness, death and unemployment. As a result, some families resorted to negative coping strategies which included child labor and engagement in antisocial behaviors.

The demographic insights indicate a predominance of women in the social networks in the slums and households being headed by individuals who were below 18 years, underscoring the socio-economic pressures prevalent in the slums. Furthermore, the educational levels and employment status of the respondents' reveal barriers to accessing better opportunities, which made the households more vulnerable. Whereas social capital offers a pathway for enhanced well-being and security, the study also points out the factors that hinder its development, such as economic disparities, a lack of trust, and ethnic polarization. These barriers contribute to the disintegration of social groups, which diminishes their effectiveness as support systems.

The study demonstrates that fostering social capital is essential in enhancing the resilience of slum communities. Interventions aimed at strengthening social networks and addressing underlying socio-economic challenges will significantly improve the livelihoods and quality of life for residents in urban slums in Kenya. Building trust and collaboration among community members is crucial in creating a more cohesive and supportive environment that can withstand the pressures of modern urban social life.

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