

EXPERIENCES OF ELDERLY PERSONS LIVING IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS IN NAIROBI, KENYA

This brief examines the experiences and challenges faced by older persons in the Korogocho and Viwandani informal settlements in Nairobi, Kenya. The information was collected using Photovoice, a participatory research approach, as a part of work undertaken by the ARISE consortium.

Photovoice participants were identified with the support of Community Health Volunteers (CHVs) who had a deep understanding of the Korogocho and Viwandani communities.

In collaboration with community co-researchers in both Korogocho and Viwandani informal settlements, three categories of people were identified as the most vulnerable and marginalised: people living with disabilities (PWD); older persons over the age of 65; and children heading households who were leading vulnerable lives.

This brief will focus on the experiences of older persons looking specifically at the challenges they face, including the burden of caring for themselves and their dependents who include their grown children and grandchildren, existing ailments and lack of access to health care, and poor environmental conditions.

For the older persons in both settlements, failing body strength due to old age coupled with the lack of income exacerbated vulnerability and marginalisation. The lack of income generating activities due to old age pushes them deeper into poverty. Consequently, the lack of money results in their inability to buy nutritious food, access to other basic needs and required medication.

PHOTOVOICE: AN APPROACH TO CONFRONT THE EXISTING INEQUITIES

Photovoice is a community based participatory qualitative research method that utilises photographs taken and selected by study participants depicting lived experiences of communities. Respondents subsequently reflect upon data gathered through their photos. In the photovoice approach, participants are co-researchers because they take the photographs and interpret their meaning for the researchers. This method differs fundamentally from traditional research where the power often lies solely with the researcher.

KOROGOCHO AND VIWANDANI INFORMAL SETTLEMENT

Korogocho, the fourth largest slum in Nairobi, hosts over 250 dwelling units/ households with an average of three persons per household. Korogocho is characterised by generational poverty depicted by poor housing, with most houses made of semi-permanent materials such as mud, tin and timber walls. The environment is highly polluted due to its proximity to the Dandora dumpsite that serves the entire Nairobi County. Poor or lack of basic infrastructure such as roads and sanitation, as well as low education levels, extensive violence, insecurity, lack of clean and affordable water for domestic use is characteristic of Korogocho.

Viwandani is one of the largest slums in Nairobi, located about 7 kilometres from the Nairobi central business district (CBD). It is situated within the industrial area of Nairobi. Many of its residents are youthful and highly mobile, working or seeking jobs within the nearby industrial area. The Ngong River, which is heavily polluted by industrial waste from neighbouring industries, is situated to the south of the settlement. Structures in Viwandani on the most part are made of iron sheets and tin walls with iron sheet roofs.



“If you bought me some flour today, I would live on that for two days and then I am back to having nothing. Sometimes I go to a friend’s house, who is as old as I am, to ask for some food in order for me to take my medication as she also does that.”

“Since COVID-19 came, my health has deteriorated. If you observe that photo, I looked very healthy, but now I cannot properly feed myself. I cannot afford to eat fruits or vegetables which I have been advised to take lots of by the doctor for the purposes of giving me strength. This photo was taken on a day when I tried to get vegetables for my diet to no avail.”

BEATRICE IS AN OLDER PERSON LIVING IN KOROGOCHO INFORMAL SETTLEMENT



“My body is getting weaker as I age, if it gets to a point where I am unable to work I will call my son to come and take over the shop. This will mean that I will not have any source of income. Such thoughts worry me so much; I can’t sleep at night.”

JACOB IS AN OLDER PERSON LIVING IN KOROGOCHO INFORMAL SETTLEMENT

BURDEN OF CARE FOR SELF AND DEPENDENTS AMONG OLDER PERSONS

For many older persons their advanced age and lack of income, often made worse by health challenges, leaves them feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility and burden of taking care of their dependents. Dysfunctional family situations increase the burden of care for older persons. This is characterized by the lack of care for aging parents due to inherent poverty. Lack of education and economic opportunities result in adult children remaining at home, girls giving birth at home while many boys enter into a life of crime. This creates an environment where adults depend on their older parents to meet their basic needs and those of their children.

EXISTING AILMENTS AND LACK OF ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

Poverty and financial constraints make access to health care services out-of-reach for older persons. The lack of nutritious food also exacerbates health issues. For most of them, the cost of health care is prohibitive.

“Currently, seeking medical assistance in hospitals is difficult, you will leave you home, head to the hospital, consult with the doctor but he will only prescribe the medication for you to buy elsewhere, the medications are not available in the hospitals. At times you don’t have any money to buy the drugs. That is a burden for us.” - Beatrice is an older person living in Korogocho Informal Settlement.

POOR ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

The infrastructure in the informal settlements is insufficient for the needs of many older people. The poorest pockets of housing within the informal settlements are left for the older persons. Access to basic sanitation is a nightmare for this population because mostly sanitary facilities are unmaintained. Poor drainage systems are uniquely challenging for the elderly who are already limited in their mobility by their age. Older persons reported difficulties of crossing dug trenches and drainage lines as they could not jump over to get to the other side. Likewise, air pollution is a great health hazard for older persons.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, it was noted that vulnerability and marginalisation were driven by individuality and other factors that affected individuals in all categories generally. The co-researchers and researchers collectively came up with some recommendations.

- Social protection programs such as cash transfers, meant to alleviate some of the problems for the elderly, more often than not, don't get to them. Communities should be sensitized on social protection programs and their eligibility criteria. In addition, cash transfer for the elderly need to be issued consistently and without discrimination.
- Social protection interventions need to be offered as a package of interventions to meaningfully address older persons vulnerabilities.
- Vulnerability indicators need to be utilised to determine a package of support appropriate for individual older persons as individuals have different health, economic and social needs.
- There is need to sensitise communities to the plight of older persons. For example, young people with not much to do might fetch water and do other small cleaning jobs for older persons in order to alleviate their hardships

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“I sometimes ask myself whether we shall be able to overcome and make it through to take care of the children. Because I am the one taking care of these children and I am old and I am not able. I sometimes feel depressed but I ask myself if I commit suicide who will I leave these children with... that will be the problem and then I just decide no, I won't commit suicide. I usually wish I couldn't have given birth to her. A person who gave birth to three children and left them and she can't even come with a mango to give the young one. I feel bad...”

LENAR IS AN OLDER PERSON LIVING IN VIWANDANI INFORMAL SETTLEMENT

The ARISE Hub – Accountability and Responsiveness in Informal Settlements for Equity – is a research consortium, instituted to enhance accountability and improve the health and wellbeing of marginalised populations living in informal urban settlements in low-and middle-income countries.

The ARISE vision is to catalyse change in approaches to enhancing accountability and improving the health and wellbeing of poor, marginalised people living in informal urban settlements.

ARISE is guided by a process of data collection, building capacity, and supporting people to exercise their right to health. ARISE works closely with the communities themselves; with a particular focus on vulnerable people living in the informal settlements; often overlooked in many projects and initiatives.

ARISE was launched in 2019 and is a 5-year project. It is implemented in four countries: Bangladesh, Kenya, India and Sierra Leone.