

Building a community in Bungoma, Kenya

by Settlements Information Network Africa (SINA)

I. INTRODUCTION

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THIS CASE STUDY describes the entirely unaided self-help activities of a low-income community in the self-planned settlement of Mjini in the town of Bungoma in western Kenya. It illustrates some of the problems of land acquisition and development for low-income groups. In the mid-1960s, upon learning that they were going to be displaced by the construction of a prison, a group of squatters saved money and collectively bought a piece of land - providing themselves with security of tenure. The families divided the land into 192 plots and built mud or cement houses. Since the site was completely unplanned and lacked services, they also built pit latrines and roads, and set aside plots for schools and a mosque. The community has continued to work together by electing an elders committee, and by forming numerous women's self-help groups. It has good relations with the Bungoma municipal council. However, the settlement's future is uncertain because the original land purchase was made in the name of an individual and it is not clear that the other members of the community have adequate legal safeguards.

II. BACKGROUND

MJINI IS LOCATED in the town of Bungoma in Kenya's Western Province. Bungoma is in a relatively rich area of Kenya, where dependable rains make it suitable for coffee growing. In 1987, it is expected that Bungoma town, which is the district headquarters, will have a population of about 35,000 people; Mjini had about 2,000 residents in 1982 but has since grown larger, mainly because of an increase in the number of tenants.

The people who make up the community of Mjini migrated to Bungoma in the mid-1950s from various parts of Tanzania, Uganda, and Mombasa. Sharing a similar Swahili culture and Islamic beliefs, these people asked if they could build a small village in Bungoma. They were given temporary permission to do so, on lands reserved for the district prison. Most of the people subsequently earned a living by engaging in petty trade.

In 1965, the township decided to expand the prison and ordered the squatters to leave. An elder in the village, Mzee Juman Bakari, began to organize the community to buy land for a permanent settlement - and thus avoid future upheavals. He did so by collecting between 50-65 Kenyan Shillings (KSh) from each household. Then he bought and registered under his name ten acres (4.05 hectares)

of unserviced land located about half a mile (0.8 kilometres) south of the town centre, close to a small commercial district. This land became the site of Mjini.

III. CREATING A NEW COMMUNITY

MZEE BAKARI DIVIDED six acres (2.43 hectares) of the land into 192 plots, each measuring approximately 16 by 22 metres. People began building homes for themselves, usually following a standard courtyard plan. Houses were built in rows, leaving room for access roads. Most of the houses were made of mud walls and tin sheet roofs, although some had cement floors and cement covered walls. The people also constructed a mosque, using both money and labour from the community.

The municipality did not provide any services for the new residents. As a result, the residents have dug pit latrines, and rubbish is either burned or collected in pits. Three privately operated water kiosks provide water for the settlement. There is no electricity. Mjini is thus entirely the result of self-help efforts.

By 1982, the community had a population of about 2,000 people divided between 360 households. All but 40 of the original 192 plot holders were still living in the community. Most of those who had left had relatives occupying their houses, who were either paying little or no rent. A number of self-help groups are active in the community, some of them since the early 1970s. Many of them focus on income-generating activities for their members. Many also focus on strengthening Islamic faith and fellowship.

A survey showed that, in 1982, the majority of the community was Luhya (56 per cent), with some Luo and Kikuyu also inhabiting the area. The settlement was still predominantly Muslim, although there were some Christian residents, mainly among the tenant population.

In 1967, the community had elected 12 elderly men to an elders committee. Based on traditional Islamic practices, the committee was mainly concerned with religious activities. However, all affairs pertaining to the community's general welfare required the approval of the elders committee. All of the community groups in Mjini thus had to obtain the elders' approval for any of their decisions. In practice, this requirement was not all that onerous, because the elders usually agreed with whatever the groups had decided. The leaders also appointed a woman to act as a liaison with, and spokesperson for, the many women's groups in Mjini, such as the *Marinda* women's group (which promotes Islam and helps needy people in the community) and the *Aruba-ya-Congo* group (a traditional dance group, which also undertakes income-generating activities). The elders committee also served as the link between the community and government authorities. Mzee Bakari, the community's organizer, was elected chairperson of the elders committee in 1967.

To help them fulfil their responsibilities, the elders committee set up a Muslim school (*madrasa*) committee in 1977 that was to concentrate on building a nursery school and a *madrasa* in Mjini. The five-member committee was active. It collected funds from the community for construction and looked for other potential donors. Although land had been reserved for the nursery school, disputes

about its ownership arose, as one of the community member's had claimed it and constructed a house on it. The committee was eventually able to purchase land and a house, adjacent to the mosque, which they converted into a nursery.

From the age of three, Muslim children normally attend *madrasa* (in addition to public school) in order to learn Arabic, and to read and study the Koran. Anxious that their children receive religious instruction, the community began holding *madrasa* classes inside the mosque in 1983. Although construction had started in 1982, the community could not afford to contribute very much; the *madrasa* took three years to build and was completed in 1985. It now stands adjacent to the mosque, a three-room cement structure with a tin roof. Although it has neither electricity nor furniture it already serves more than 300 children. The nursery school is used for taking some of the overload *madrasa* classes. The *madrasa* committee is still active, and is trying to raise money for desks, books, teachers, and building costs.

The elders committee cannot claim similar successes. Although its chairperson had had unchallenged decision-making powers from its inception in 1967, this came to an end in 1980. At that time, several elders complained to the municipal authorities that Mzee Bakari was selling plots for his own benefit. Although he had always kept four of the ten acres for his own use, the sale of some of the land apparently stretched the tolerance of some of the community too far. In 1981, Mzee Bakari was asked to resign his post. He left Mjini soon afterwards.

But he left still possessing a legal title to all of the land. The municipal authorities eventually agreed to intervene on behalf of the Mjini residents. For a fee of KSh325 (US\$20) residents could have their plots surveyed, and for another KSh175 (US\$11), they could have the plot's title and deed transferred into their name. The elders committee encouraged people to participate in this process.

The elders committee again entered into some controversy in 1985. They began to insist that the *madrasa's* headmaster, a Ugandan, be sacked, so that he could be replaced by a Kenyan. Women in the community were adamant that this should not happen: the headmaster had been very successful in raising contributions of money and materials for the *madrasa* from outside the community and had been a key figure in its eventual construction. The women insisted that the elders at least find a replacement for him before sacking him. The elders could not - or at least did not - so the headmaster stayed on. However, the confrontation has had a demoralizing effect on the committee, which did not meet once during the following year.

IV. THE FUTURE

THE TRANSFER OF land titles is still far from complete because many people have not been able to raise money for the land transaction. Mzee Bakari died in 1985 and his son, who is living in another part of Bungoma, inherited the land titles. Residents allege that he was seen in Mjini in late 1986, offering some of the plots for sale. It is not clear what might happen if a resident's plot, and the home on it, is sold in this way. However, it is likely that whether or not the residents obtain the municipality's support will be crucial.


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Even though the job of physically erecting a settlement is over, community cohesion and co-operation in Mjini is still high. Most of the original settlers still live in the area. Many of them now rent out rooms, so the tenant population has grown. In addition to the *Marinda* and *Aruba-ya-Congo* groups, there are other groups which are active in Mjini. A harambee women's organization, formed in 1982 to aid poor people, assists families in distress and helps them help themselves - by undertaking income-generating projects such as selling maize and handicrafts, and by cooking for special occasions. Another new group, the Mpoli self-help group, helps members raise money for school fees or for upgrading their homes. They also hope to build houses for members who have plots, and have already succeeded in erecting a house for the secretary (who has since been able to rent it out).

V. CONCLUSION

SELF-HELP ACTIVITIES are still strong in Mjini and seem likely to continue despite the current uncertainties on security of tenure. The community provides a good example of entirely unaided self-help. The town council, while providing the all-important political support and encouragement, has not made any investment of resources. Mjini community, through its loose structure of self-help and women's groups, and the elders committee, has managed to improve shelter and services on an affordable basis for all residents.

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