



Youth, waste and work in Mathare: whose business and whose politics?

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This paper was originally prepared for a seminar on the Politics of Work, Youth, Space and Poverty in the Kenyan Context, hosted by the British Institute of East Africa (11 March 2010). The paper was written during a 12-month period of ethnographic fieldwork that took place in Nairobi, Kenya. The insights shared here form part of a work in progress, and in the spirit of "reporting from the field" the paper also reflects on the emergent quality of fieldwork. The original research questions and theoretical frameworks that are neatly fashioned within the confines of academic departments are inevitably subject to new iterations and adjustments once researchers are in the field.

Acknowledgment: I would like to thank Meghan Ference and Justin DeKoszmovszky for their helpful comments on this paper, Rose Nyawira for her valuable research assistance, and

ABSTRACT In Nairobi's Mathare Valley, one of the largest and oldest informal settlements in East Africa, waste has become a source of income generation for youth and a means of asserting slum dwellers' rights to the city. While waste management has become a platform for engaging with the broader politics of basic services, it also interfaces with "sustainability" initiatives that invite alternative market-based approaches to address the challenges of poverty. It is at once a critique and an enabler of the excesses of modernity, at once a business and a form of political mobilization and contestation. The politics of work and waste among youth reflects alternative modes of urbanization grounded in both the dynamics of youth culture among the urban poor and grassroots market-based approaches to the provision of basic services.

KEYWORDS Base of the Pyramid / corporate–community relations / entrepreneurship / poverty / sanitation / social enterprise / urbanization / waste / youth

I. INTRODUCTION

a. Context: waste as resource

Development discourses concerning urbanization and its problems often give little attention or appreciation to the skills, endurance and resourcefulness of the urban poor. Pieterse, however, offers an alternative account, describing how "...by sheer dint of necessity people make do and invent an endless series of permutations of informalized work, service provision, occupation, places of bodily relief and passion."⁽¹⁾ These efforts combine alternative modes of survival, work and collective action that often render "entrepreneurship" (in the literal sense of the French word "*entreprendre*", meaning to "take on") a form of business activism.

This paper focuses on one particular facet of "taking on", namely waste. The entrepreneurship of waste acts as a vehicle for sustainable livelihood creation while contesting and filling the vacuum left by the state. The innovative waste management schemes undertaken by youth in urban Kenyan shanty towns are increasingly rendering waste material a valuable commodity. Waste has become both a source of income generation and a way to provide a service to communities where public service provision is otherwise absent.

This paper reflects on the first seven months of PhD fieldwork, including the study of a corporate–community partnership known as Community Cleaning Services. The social life and local meanings of this “Base of the Pyramid” (BoP)⁽²⁾ business are explored within the broader context of youth-led entrepreneurship focused on waste management and basic service provision. The discussion of waste has two facets. First, the paper describes the literal aspects of solid and human waste in low-income settlements and its implications for the urban poor. Second, the paper considers the figurative concept of waste, using ethnographic material to question the normative assumptions about waste as “matter out of place” and relics of the “excesses of modernity”.⁽³⁾ Recognizing that the problematic category of “youth” in Kenya refers to anyone between the ages of 18 and 35, I argue that the politics of work and waste among youth reflects alternative “modes of urbanization”⁽⁴⁾ grounded both in the dynamics of youth culture among the urban poor and market-based approaches from below to the provision of basic services.

The paper comprises five sections. First, I situate my research by providing some background on the local political context concerning youth and work, and outline the broad methodological approach of the fieldwork. Second, I provide a brief theoretical reflection on cleanliness, consumption and aspirations, to frame the inquiry of market-based approaches to poverty alleviation, drawing on the works of Burke, Douglas and Appadurai.⁽⁵⁾ Third, I provide an overview of how “human waste” is dealt with in Mathare, considering four main approaches to sanitation and leading to a description of the corporate–community partnership I use as my central case study (SC Johnson/Community Cleaning Services). Community Cleaning Services (CCS) is a micro-franchise business where the company, SC Johnson, is helping entrepreneurs in these neighbourhoods start new shared toilet-cleaning businesses that deliver “...new incomes, better hygiene, interesting new business opportunities and learnings for the company.”⁽⁶⁾ I seek to highlight the complexity of “urban poverty” in which this corporate–community partnership is grounded as much more than a potential “market”. Fourth, I reflect on how solid waste has become a “resource” for youth in the last 10 years, in particular looking at garbage collection and the role of youth in shaping the informal economy of waste management in Nairobi’s “slums”. Finally, I raise some critical questions concerning this complex web of corporate involvement in low-income communities, youth work and waste as a locus for innovation, sustainability and environmental justice.

II. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

a. Background: contested categories of youth and work

The entrepreneurial practices of youth in the slums respond both critically and constructively to the disappointing contradiction between state claims and the realities on the ground. A recent manifestation of this contradiction is the government initiative, Kazi kwa Vijana (Work for Youth), a response to the violence following the contested 2007 elections seeking to put youth back to work. Although many find the idea laudable, youth have been disheartened by the corruption and lack of accountability, not to mention such practical issues as late pay, low-wage manual labour

all the people who have generously shared their time and stories with me during my fieldwork in Nairobi.

1. Pieterse, Edgar (2003), *City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development*, Zed Books Ltd, London, 200 pages.
2. The Base of the Pyramid is a demographic description used among management scholars and practitioners that refers to the 3–4 billion people living on US\$ 2 a day. Prahalad, Hart and Hammond were champions in suggesting that the Base of the Pyramid provided companies with an “untapped market”. See Prahalad, C K and Allen Hammond (2002), “Serving the world’s poor, profitably”, *Harvard Business Review*, September issue, pages 48–57; also Hart, Stuart and C K Prahalad (2002), “The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid”, *Strategy+Business* Vol 26, January, pages 54–67; Prahalad, C K and Allen Hammond (2004), “Selling to the poor”, *Foreign Policy* Vol 30, May/June, pages 30–37; Prahalad, C K (2005), *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*, Wharton Publishing, New Jersey, 305 pages; Hart, Stuart L (2005), *Capitalism at the Crossroads*, Wharton Publishing, New Jersey, 239 pages; and Hart, Stuart L (2008), *Capitalism at the Crossroads*, Second Edition, Wharton Publishing, New Jersey, 254 pages.
3. Moore, Sarah A (2009), “The excess of modernity: garbage politics in Oaxaca, Mexico”, *The Professional Geographer* Vol 61, No 4, pages 426–437.
4. Harvey, David (2008), “The right to the city”, *New Left Review* Vol 53, September/October, pages 23–40.
5. Burke, Timothy (1996), *LifeBuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*, Duke University Press, Durham, 293 pages; also Douglas, Mary (1996), *The World of Goods*, Routledge, London, 165 pages; and Appadurai, Arjun (2008), “The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition”, in

David Held and Henrietta L Moore (editors), *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation*, Oneworld Publication, Oxford, pages 29–35.

6. Interview with SCJ strategic sustainability manager/CCS co-founder, October 2009.

7. Kasarani Youth Congress (2009), *Mobilization without Emancipation: The Case of Kazi Kwa Vijana in Kasarani Constituency*, Kasarani Youth Congress Report, page 9. The Kasarani Youth Congress was founded in 2007: "...a vibrant youth initiative with a mission to provide a shared platform for youth to ensure the improvement of their position and condition and address the socioeconomic political disorders that continue to subject them to desperation, injustices and inhuman living conditions." (E-mail invitation sent on 11 December 2009 by KYC convenor for the launch of the audit report on Kazi Kwa Vijana.)

8. See reference 7, page 7.

9. Population Reference Bureau, available at <http://www.prb.org/Countries/Kenya.aspx>.

10. Yaqub, Shahin (2009), "Independent child migrants in developing countries: unexplored links in migration and development", Innocenti Working Paper IWP-2009-01, Innocenti Research Centre, Florence.

11. Gidwani, Vinay (2008), *Capital Interrupted: Agrarian Development and Politics of Work in India*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 327 pages.

12. Paine, Lynn Sharp (2004), *Value Shift: Why Companies Must Merge Social and Financial Imperatives to Achieve Superior Performance*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 302 pages; also Porritt, Jonathon (2007), *Capitalism: As if the World Matters*, Earthscan, London, 385 pages; and Simanis, Eric and Stuart Hart (2008), "Beyond selling to the poor: building business intimacy through embedded

and no prospects for skills development. Today, most youth refer to the programme as Kazi kwa Vijana – Pesa kwa Wazee (Work for Youth – Money for the Old).

On 10 December 2009, the Kasarani Youth Congress launched a social audit report on Kazi Kwa Vijana as part of an effort to ensure that public service programmes targeting youth are "*effective, responsive and accountable*".⁽⁷⁾ The report argued that the KKV government initiative was "patchy and superficial", laudable in its conception – but flawed in its implementation. It highlighted the need to address youth unemployment through more empowering grassroots efforts rather than a constant cycle of one-off wage labour opportunities that pay poorly and provide no skills training.

This event and the programme criticized by the report reflect the wide-ranging concern for the role of youth in Kenya and the complex politics of work, particularly following the post-election violence in 2008 and the volatile sociopolitical climate. According to the report, 76 per cent of working age youth are formally unemployed and the majority live in poverty.⁽⁸⁾ These statistics, however, do not reflect the diverse forms of economic activity that lie outside the official definitions of work, including the "portfolios" of youth-led enterprise that have emerged, especially in the last decade. Young people aged between 10 and 35 comprise approximately half the Kenyan population.⁽⁹⁾ A quarter of the population is aged between 18 and 35, technically of working age, although many who are younger also work. Urban migration in Kenya brings waves of young people to Nairobi in the hope of work prospects, but given the lack of employment opportunities most of these young migrants are absorbed into low-income settlements – where the relative affordability and flexibility of the informal sector enables survival.⁽¹⁰⁾ As a result, youth under the age of 35 comprise a large majority of the urban poor population, and the propensity to become self-employed, often described as "hustling", has rendered entrepreneurship a survival mechanism. But the emergence of certain kinds of entrepreneurial activities in low-income settlements has also shaped new styles of urban livelihood and geographies of youth.

The business and politics of waste expose alternative narratives of labour where young economically active poor entrepreneurs are affirming themselves outside of the traditional laws of value and within their communities.⁽¹¹⁾ These practices become integral to the particular culture of the *kadogo* (small) economy of low-income neighbourhoods, while evoking the contemporary global discourses of sustainability (economic, environmental and social) where business – in this case the business of garbage and toilets – can only survive if it encompasses both a viable economic logic and a tangible social benefit to the entrepreneurs and the end consumers.⁽¹²⁾

b. Methodology

The research focuses specifically on three sub-neighbourhoods in Nairobi's Mathare Valley, namely Mlango Kubwa, Mathare 10 and Huruma. The methodology has been first and foremost ethnographic and my interest lies in the expressed perceptions and experiences of waste, sanitation and work among youth in Mathare. In order to earn the trust of my key informants, I spent the first few months in Nairobi in overalls and gumboots and with

brush in hand, shadowing different entrepreneurial teams that provided cleaning services in their neighbourhoods. This “embodied” participant observation gave me literal and figurative access to private domestic and social spaces usually hermetic to visitors. It also gave me invaluable insight into the critical infrastructural challenges facing the urban poor, including water shortages, poor sewage systems and the lack of formally allocated garbage dumping sites. Once I had established relationships with five key youth groups, I requested interviews to conduct “life histories”, and held focus group sessions to investigate the relationship between youth, waste, business and social change. Another set of interviews and focus groups were conducted with the customers of youth-led waste management enterprises, gauging their satisfaction with services received and their perspectives on youth and their work in the community.

Referring to Malinowski, Mosse states that “...*what anthropologists know is inseparable from their relationship with those they study*”, and asserts that “...*epistemology is relational*.”⁽¹³⁾ It is with Mosse’s reflexive understanding of contemporary ethnography as “relational” and “moving in and out” of the “complex objects of study” that I have treated my research methodology. It has been quite impossible not to be, in Scheper Hughes’s words, “politically committed”⁽¹⁴⁾ at points – to share my research insights with key informants, voice my observations in meetings when asked, and facilitate connections between different groups who share common goals but whose existing networks have not yet intersected. And perhaps most fundamentally, my status as a young person and a mother afforded me a certain credibility in the communities where I spent most of my days – far more than my status as researcher or European (*mzungu*).

III. CLEANLINESS, CONSUMPTION, TASTE

a. “Cleanliness is next to godliness”

Cleanliness has been equated with social progress since the colonial era, evoking a social message through a stream of multinational advertisements (Figure 1). In the last decade, concerns regarding the health hazards of urbanization among the poor have justified “social missions” coupling the pursuit of cleanliness with a public health message.⁽¹⁵⁾ Hence, the twentieth century problematic formulation of “cleanliness” has turned into a twenty-first century discourse of “preventive health care” in the face of growing concerns regarding hygiene, sanitation and waste in urban low-income settlements. The implicit imperative is: “*Wash your hands and you won’t get cholera or diarrhoea.*” For example, Unilever’s Lifebuoy brand has recently partnered with UNICEF to promote a hand-washing campaign (Global Hand-washing Day 2008), although its claims to “saving lives” through hygiene have been part of the Lifebuoy branding message since the 1930s.⁽¹⁶⁾

In Cross and Street’s recent anthropological discussion of Base of the Pyramid (BoP) initiatives,⁽¹⁷⁾ the work of management scholar C K Prahalad⁽¹⁸⁾ and the case of Unilever’s Lifebuoy initiative in India are evoked to examine the shifts in language of corporate social responsibility.⁽¹⁹⁾ The authors argue that the BoP approach in many ways “...*dispenses with any reference to philanthropy or acts of giving, and makes no distinction between ethical practice and the self-interested pursuit of profit.*”⁽²⁰⁾

innovation”, Working Paper, Johnson School of Management, Cornell University.

13. Mosse, David (2005a), “Anti-social anthropology? Objectivity, objection and the ethnography of public policy and professional communities”, *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* Vol 12, No 4, pages 935–956, page 935.

14. Here I refer to Nancy Sheper-Hughes’s article “The primacy of the ethical”, where she challenges the notion that contemporary anthropology can be “objectivist”, arguing for a “more frankly engaged” approach; see Sheper-Hughes, Nancy (1995), “The primacy of the ethical: propositions for a militant anthropology”, *Current Anthropology* Vol 36, No 3, pages 409–440, page 438.

15. See Cross, Jamie and Alice Street (2009), “Anthropology at the Bottom of the Pyramid”, *Anthropology Today* Vol 25, No 4, August, pages 3–9.

16. For online reference, see: <http://videos.unilever.com/brands/personalcarebrands/lifebuoy.aspx>, accessed 26 April 2010. For more information on the UNICEF approach to hand-washing, see the 2008 report “Are your hands clean enough? Study findings on hand-washing with soap behaviour in

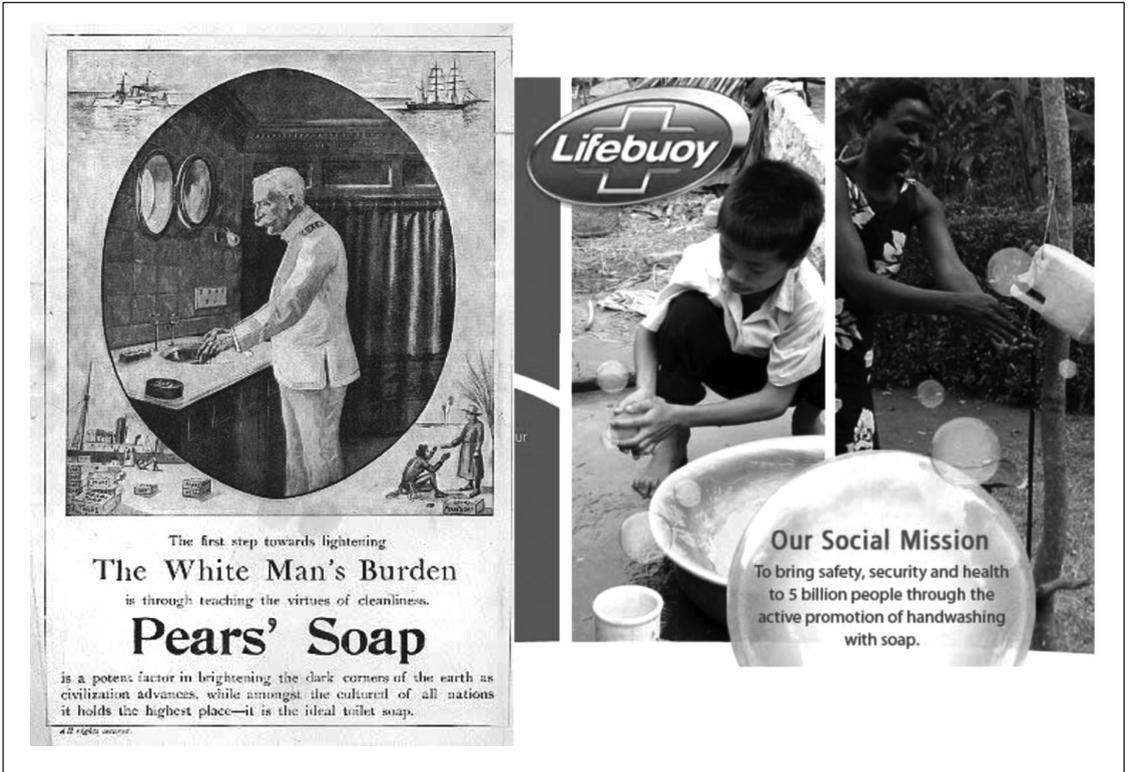


FIGURE 1
Pear's soap advertisement 1903; Unilever's Lifebuoy soap

SOURCE: Personal correspondence received from David Menascé of BoPobs.

Kenya”, Report commissioned by the Water and Sanitation Programme on behalf of the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation and co-sponsored by UNICEF pages 4–64.

17. See reference 15.

18. See reference 2, Prahalad (2005).

19. For the business case study on Unilever's Base of the Pyramid work, see London, Ted (2006), “Hindustan lever at the Base of the Pyramid: growth for the 21st century”, GlobalLens Teaching Note GL1-428-604T, William Davidson Institute/Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. For further reference on corporate social responsibility, see Gupta, Dipankar (2005), “Corporate responsibility”, in CV Baxi and Ajit Prasad (editors), *Corporate*

Cross and Street's article raises crucial questions regarding corporate initiatives that attest to a basic needs argument while pursuing a for-profit agenda. The challenge in merging the business motive with the social objective is not only how to turn a social need into a product or service demand, but also how to ensure that the supply of that demand is then perceived as a social good: “...a convincing composite of both social and commercial value.”⁽²¹⁾ In many ways, public health has been an optimal locus for BoP innovation, tapping into educational marketing campaigns, direct distribution franchises, and leveraging the local networks within communities whose human and social capital become entry points to the targeted beneficiary cum customer.

Cross and Street note that “...by appending economic and social development goals to health system privatization, such interventions are reconfiguring relationships between business, science, state and consumer/citizen.”⁽²²⁾ In the context of my research, this privatization of health systems actually leverages the grassroots mode of privatization of basic services. Mathare entrepreneurs at community levels are private actors – albeit small scale – already providing services in the absence of state-led service delivery such as waste and sanitation management.

b. Culture, taste, pleasures and displeasures

Most contemporary critiques point to culture as a “victim” of globalization rather than considering the ways in which culture itself shapes the discourses and practices of globalization.⁽²³⁾ Globalization as constitutive of culture highlights a paradox of modernity in relation to the production and consumption of goods. On the one hand, the ways in which corporate goods and products transcend national and cultural borders point to the homogenizing effects of the global market economy on cultures. On the other hand, goods and services become integrated into everyday consumption patterns, and brands are appropriated into popular discourse.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas has written about the social uses and cultural significance of “goods” and how people relate to them. She calls for a “corrected version of economic rationality”, moving away from the traditional economic theory of the “rational individual” and perfect market information. The rational theory too easily abstracts the decision-making processes from the social context in which goods are made significant. Culture plays a role in defining what good is “fit for consumption”, and provides “... a set of justifying principles for mustering support and solidarity, and a set of keep out signs.”⁽²⁴⁾

An inherent consideration when examining how people relate to goods is the role of consumption and “the development of needs”.⁽²⁵⁾ Burke’s ethnography of commodities, consumption and cleanliness in the Zimbabwean context traces the colonial influences concerning what a “modern African family” ought to consume and want, to contemporary perceptions of “common sense” needs. His study starts with the critical questions:

“What causes ‘tastes’ to ‘transfer’? What changes relationships between things and people? How do people acquire deeply felt and expressed desires for things they never had or wanted before?”⁽²⁶⁾

Burke’s examination of the “meanings invested in goods” offers a useful analytical lens for the investigation of “meanings invested in services” in the context of this research. Pointing to the inextricable relationship between goods, services, social meanings and social power, Burke asserts:

“It is also the accumulated power of commodities to actually constitute, organize and relate to people, institutions and discourses, to contain within themselves the forms of consciousness through which capitalism manufactures its subjects.”⁽²⁷⁾

In Mathare, CCS entrepreneurs use SC Johnson’s cleaning products as a means to an end. Rather than the purchase and consumption of that product being the commercial value and end in itself, the end is indeed the service, and the mode of promotion and marketing is based on entrepreneurship and word of mouth. In other words, the social life of the products is manifest through people-to-people transactions based on trust and forged relationships rather than a purely “economic rationality” dictating the purchasing decision. There is another important way in which the corporate product takes on a life of its own through the organizational practices of CCS as a local enterprise. That is, how the product, reflected through a professional and organized service, responds to individual and collective aspirations concerning the desired standards of cleanliness in the *mtaa*,⁽²⁸⁾ while seeking to raise expectations.

Social Responsibility, Concepts and Cases: The Indian Experience, Excel Books, New Delhi, pages 21–27.

20. See reference 15, page 5.

21. See reference 15, page 5.

22. See reference 15, page 5.

23. Held, David and Henrietta L Moore (editors) (2008), *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation*, Oneworld Publication, Oxford, 401 pages.

24. See reference 5, Douglas (1996), page xxii.

25. See reference 5, Burke (1996).

26. See reference 5, Burke (1996), page 3.

27. See reference 5, Burke (1996), page 5.

28. *Mtaa* is a colloquial expression used in low-income communities to refer to “the (neighbour)hood”.

29. Appadurai, in Held and Moore (2008), see reference 23, page 29.

30. See reference 11, page 167.

31. Davis, Mike (2006), *Planet of Slums*, Verso, London, page 155, quoting United Nations (2003), *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report Human Settlements*, United Nations Human Settlement Programme, Earthscan Publications Ltd, UK, page 48.

32. Here, my use of “culture” is based on a comment that was once mentioned in passing by friend, mentor and legal anthropologist Annelise Riles (Professor of Law and Anthropology at Cornell University). Riles referred to anthropology as “...the study of unstated norms that govern our behaviour.”

33. “Art of delegation” is an expression coined by Jan Chipcase, interface designer and anthropologist, who has undertaken human behavioural research for Nokia focusing on how people interact with mobile phones, particularly across the developing world.

In his conceptualization of aspirations as a “capacity”, Appadurai points to the flawed assumption that culture somehow contradicts and stands in the way of development: “*It is in culture that ideas of the future, as much as of those about the past, are embedded and nurtured.*”⁽²⁹⁾ As such, the “future-oriented logic of development” ought to seek out the “cultural logics”⁽³⁰⁾ of stakeholders, beneficiaries and participants of development insofar as it is the “capacity” to imagine one’s future that needs to be folded into the very concept of development – not, in Davis’s words, some Northern-led “international perspective” that has become the “de facto paradigm for development.”⁽³¹⁾ Indeed, seeking to better understand the “capacity to aspire” of various actors means investigating how people imagine their own future and articulate their definition of progress and development. In particular, the study of community-based waste management services integrates a reflection on the social experiences, perceptions and ties that are inextricably linked to the commercial viability of these community-based businesses. In the context of toilets in Mathare, the norms that govern people’s behaviour undergo transformation insofar as changing behaviours disrupt and continuously re-shape what is considered “normal”.⁽³²⁾

“Now people expect cleaner toilets, and they will start to apply pressure on community members who do not want to pay for cleaner toilets, just like they did when garbage collection started about 10 years ago. Today, everyone pays for garbage collection, and hopefully tomorrow everyone will want to pay for a toilet-cleaning service that improves our environment and prevents diseases.” (Interview with CCS customer, November 2009)

IV. FROM THE TOP-DOWN TO THE BOTTOM-UP: SANITATION IN NAIROBI

a. The contradiction of modernity

In an age when the “art of delegation”⁽³³⁾ assumes that almost everything can be done for you, one of the things that cannot be done on one’s behalf

BOX 1

In December 2009, a group of private sector individuals, NGOs and community-based entrepreneurs gathered at the PanAfric Hotel in Nairobi for a meeting hosted by the World Bank’s Water and Sanitation Programme (WSP) to discuss the management of public and community toilets in the city of Nairobi. “*Water is life, but sanitation is dignity*” said the WSP moderator in his opening remarks.

This event reflected a growing theme among institutional circles, including local government authorities, NGOs and international development agencies, namely how to address the lack of public toilet facilities in the central business district and especially the lack of community toilet facilities in the low-income residential areas. However, the event not only articulated the heightened demand for improved sanitation in the city, but also addressed the increasing interest in enterprise-led approaches to tackling challenges of urban poverty. Although each of the individuals present at the meeting came from seemingly disparate sectors, with the private sector as a minority, the prevalent consensus was that, as one person put it: “*Shit is big business!*”

BOX 2

The four types of toilet facility in Nairobi

- **Public convenience toilets** are found in town and market places, in other words away from home.
- **Community-based public toilets** provide the only source of public convenience for a large majority of people living in low-income settlements. The cost of these two types of “pay-per-use facilities” is usually KES 5 (US\$ 0.07)⁽¹⁾, hence the incidence of open defecation, especially among children.
- **Residential, semi-private shared toilets** offer limited access to those living in a particular compound or building, or on a specific floor. The cost of access to these toilets tends to be reflected in a higher monthly rent compared to households with no access to a shared toilet.
- **Self-contained toilets** are enclosed within the apartments of the few higher-income residents living within and on the periphery of Mathare.

The majority of residents rely on either public toilets, where they pay per use, or on shared toilets near their homes. In both cases, the conditions of maintenance, cleanliness and infrastructure are “...not what anyone would want it to be.”⁽²⁾ In a classic “tragedy of the commons”⁽³⁾ situation, “...no one wants to deal with their own shit, let alone their neighbours’. And in the frequent absence of water... you can imagine.” (Interview, December 2009.)

⁽¹⁾ As of 26 April 2010, US\$ 1 = 77.35 KES (Kenyan Shillings). Conversion rates are from <http://www.xe.com/ucc/>; all conversions in the text are approximate.

⁽²⁾ The SCJ strategic sustainability manager and CCS co-founder often uses this phrasing when explaining CCS’s value to the community customer.

⁽³⁾ Hardin, Garrett (1968), “Tragedy of the commons”, *Science* Vol 162, No 3859, 13 December, pages 1243–1248.

is going to the toilet. Access to a toilet has indeed, in certain parts of the world, become more difficult and, proportionate to one’s monthly budget, arguably more expensive than having access to a mobile phone. So while the mobile phone has managed to democratize modes of communication and facilitate participation in a “modern” culture of technology, the “art of defecation” remains one of the key issues of concern in contemporary urban development. According to recent statistics, 2.6 billion people in the world today lack access to adequate sanitation, and diarrhoeal diseases have killed more people than AIDS and malaria combined.⁽³⁴⁾

b. The different approaches to sanitation in Nairobi

In Kenya today, there are myriad development schemes that address the problem of sanitation, each with a particular set of funding, operational and implementation arrangements. The four categories discussed below are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive but, rather, propose an intellectual scaffolding with which to examine Nairobi’s complex sanitation context.

First, the infrastructure-led initiatives, which consist of public-private-social sector partnerships (e.g. Nairobi city council, Athi Water Company, World Bank’s Water and Sanitation Programme and Pamoja Trust). These efforts, involving strategic alliances to collate institutional competencies, usually consist of building new ablution blocks in informal settlements. They face the challenge of integrating proper urban planning considerations into a responsible upgrading programme that is sensitive to local community structures. Often largely in the hands of big institutional players during the construction phase, these initiatives

34. George, Rose (2008), *The Big Necessity: Adventures in the World of Human Waste*, Portobello Books, London, 288 pages. For the World Health Organization source, see www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/mdg1/en/index.html, accessed 26 March 2010.

35. Schafft, Kai A and Davydd Greenwood (2003), "Promises and dilemmas of participation: action research, search conference methodology and community development", *Journal of the Community Development Society* Vol 34, No 1, pages 18–35.

36. This figure comes from a former Mathare resident who is now seeking to rehabilitate the Mathare city council toilets. (Interview, Nairobi, March 2010)

37. Conference on the Management of Public and Community Toilets in Nairobi, Panafric Hotel, Nairobi, 8 December 2009.

38. According to the Kenya Institute for Public Policy and Analysis, the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) was established in 2003: "*The fund aims to control imbalances in regional development brought about by partisan politics. It targets all constituency level development projects, particularly those aiming to combat poverty at the grassroots.*" See <http://www.kippra.org/Constituency.asp>, accessed 26 April 2010.

39. Stieff, Barbara (2008), *Hundertwasser for Kids: Harvesting Dreams in the Realm of the Painter King*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, page 65.

40. See v. Münch, Elisabeth, Camilla Wirseen, Deepa Patel, Ashley Wheaton and Alexander Jachnow (2009), "Urban slum dwellers in Kenya and Bangladesh benefit from using Peepoo bags which are self-sanitizing and biodegradable", available at <http://www2.gtz.de/>

reach relative paralysis when it comes to working with communities on management and maintenance of facilities. In most cases, although there are exceptions, the communities are largely "beneficiaries" of the scheme, and are not included as "agents of change" until the plans and construction are finalized.⁽³⁵⁾

Second, rehabilitation initiatives, which target dilapidated public toilet facilities in the low-income settlements. Kenya's dramatic post-independence urban migration wave in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in burgeoning low-income neighbourhoods combined with an absence of public maintenance services. In Mathare, 152 city council public toilets were said to have been built in the 1970s.⁽³⁶⁾ However, most had become run-down over the years and, by the early 2000s, had in many cases become illicit spaces for gangs, drug deals and medically unsupervised abortions, and generally too intimidating for most residents to access. A water and sanitation specialist from the WSP recently remarked: "*Around 2001, 2002, the state of public toilets in the Nairobi was absolutely deplorable.*"⁽³⁷⁾ Following the 2007 disputed elections and the wave of violence that followed throughout the country, the rehabilitation schemes for urban residential and public toilets were strategically supported as part of the local Constituency Development Fund's (CDF)⁽³⁸⁾ efforts to engage and appease the urban poor youth. Both the Kazi Kwa Vijana efforts and the CDF's efforts in Starehe constituency (of which Mathare is a part) demonstrated an awareness that crime and gang violence in the slums was inextricably linked to the lack of employment opportunities for youth. In various neighbourhoods, the upgraded toilet facilities granted youth groups the opportunity to collect entrance fees and maintain facilities, thereby creating an income-generating opportunity while improving relations between youth and the community. The upgraded toilet facility is intended to benefit everyone, becoming a source of social cohesion, political power, improved sanitation and a "safer" environment.

Third, there are technology-driven approaches, which highlight the "value" of human waste from an environmental and economic point of view. Two examples of such initiatives include the NGO Umande Trust and its toilet facilities in Kibera, which recapture methane gas; and the Swedish social enterprise Peepoople that has designed a "self-sanitizing, single-use biodegradable toilet" that turns "pee and poo" into organic fertilizer. These approaches, although different in technical means and in produced ends, exemplify what Austrian artist and environmentalist Friedensreich Hundertwasser would have called "the cycle of life". The "Peepoo" idea does what Hundertwasser called "*...turning poo into humus – a special sort of earth which is very rich in nutrients... We form part of the cycle of nature if our poo is allowed to be transformed into humus.*"⁽³⁹⁾ The biogas approach also provides an alternative to the planet's increasingly depleted fossil fuels. Neither of these approaches, in practice and as operating business models, is without challenges.

A successful feasibility study in Kibera (another large Nairobi slum) showed a "*...high level of user acceptance.*"⁽⁴⁰⁾ Peepoople is in the process of finalizing the business model and operational logistics. Here, innovation leverages existing coping strategies of the urban poor – "flying toilets"⁽⁴¹⁾ being the apotheosis of "last resort" strategies in the absence of an alternative "place" to relieve oneself in the slums. But does the "Peepoo" model legitimize the lack of sanitation facilities, or does it provide an innovative solution in the absence of immediate adequate government

provision of sanitation services? In recent field interviews with residents and professionals in the urbanization/sanitation sector, some called into question the ethics of turning a problem into an opportunity, asking whether the opportunity legitimizes the problem.⁽⁴²⁾ Others, instead, suggested that turning the problem into an opportunity offers a constructive and creative interim solution, building on the existing "...stories of survival without subsidies or welfare."⁽⁴³⁾ These questions also interweave the discussion of citizen rights with that of consumer choice.

Finally, there is the market-based "service" approach. Two initiatives are mentioned here: first, a "social enterprise" known as IkoToilet; and second, the "corporate-community" partnership, Community Cleaning Services.

IkoToilet is part private enterprise and part development model, seeking to engage with urban councils on the planning, construction and operation of public toilet facilities in the city. The initiative was started by David Kuria, an Ashoka fellow and the 2009 "Africa social entrepreneur of the year". It is claimed that 15,000 people access these public toilets each day, and IkoToilet currently employs around 200 staff, offering "...employment opportunities for young people."⁽⁴⁴⁾ Outside most IkoToilets there is a row of shoe-shining stations, also a small kiosk selling snacks and drinks opposite the main entrance. In other words, this model turns the basic needs experience of sanitation into an experience of leisure and consumption.

All these approaches have merits and limitations. Most notably, they engage differently with the end-user. In certain cases, the end-user is a citizen recipient of the right to better sanitation. In other cases, the end-user is an agent of improvement. In all cases, the end-user becomes a "consumer-client" of a particular facility, service or product offering. In merging the roles of citizen and client, community member and customer, sanitation is, on the one hand, subject to consensus-building (when it comes to maintenance, management and payment) while on the other, it remains a private matter of consumer choice and personal hygiene.

Although I have investigated all the approaches to sanitation mentioned above, my ethnographic study focuses especially on Community Cleaning Services (CCS). When I started my PhD research, I intended to conduct a critical examination of "the role of market-based approaches to poverty alleviation", the relatively recent proposition that has received increasing attention from management scholars, corporations eager to integrate an ethos of "social responsibility" into their core business operations, and development agencies that perceived a growing opportunity in aligning enterprise models with development goals.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The intellectual interrogation of the BoP hypothesis⁽⁴⁶⁾ led to an interest in conducting a "project ethnography"⁽⁴⁷⁾ of a corporate-community partnership that exemplified new corporate discourses and practices in low-income markets. My 2005 involvement in the nascent phase of the SC Johnson-sponsored BoP pilot project in Kenya made me all the more curious to study the recent history of SC Johnson's work in low-income settlements of Nairobi.

Once in the field, beyond a corporate-community interface, the issue of sanitation and the involvement of youth in the business model opened the scope for inquiry and raised crucial issues beyond the role of the corporation. Fundamentally, CCS is doing much more than simply providing a new source of product distribution in the untapped markets

Dokumente/oe44/ecosan/en-benefit-from-using-peepoo-bags-Kenya-Bangladesh-2009.pdf.

41. "Flying toilet" refers to defecation in a bag, which is then thrown outside. This coping strategy is used in the absence of a safe and available alternative, and is especially common at night among women and children for reasons of security.

42. For critiques of Base of the Pyramid approaches in particular, see for example Karnani, Aneel (2007), "Doing well and doing good – case study: 'Fair and Lovely' whitening cream", *Strategic Management Journal* Vol 28, pages 1351–1357; also Warnholz, Jean-Louis (2007), "Poverty reduction for profit? A critical examination of business opportunities at the Bottom of the Pyramid", Working Paper 160, October, University of Oxford, available at <http://www3.qeh.ox.ac.uk/pdf/qehwp/qehwps160.pdf> and from http://www.equalinrights.org/content/resources_poverty.html; and Walsh, J P, J C Kress and K W Beyerchen (2005), "Book review essay: promises and perils at the Bottom of the Pyramid / The fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: eradicating poverty through profits", *Administrative Science Quarterly* Vol 50, No 3, pages 473–482.

43. Sharma, Kalpana (2000), *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 209 pages, page 78.

44. David Kuria, 8 December 2009.

45. UNDP (2008), "Creating value for all: strategies for doing business with the poor", United Nations Development Programme Report, New York, July.

46. See reference 2.

47. Mosse, David (2005b), *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*, Pluto Press, London, 315 pages.

48. See reference 3, page 431.

49. Simanis, Eric et al. (2008), *The Base of the Pyramid Protocol: Towards Next Generation BoP Strategy*, Centre for Sustainable Global Enterprise, second edition, pages 1–51, available at http://www.johnson.cornell.edu/sge/docs/BoP_Protocol_2nd_ed.pdf.

50. Holliday, Charles O, Stephan Schmidheiny and Philip Watts (2002), *Walking the Talk: The Business Case for Sustainable Development*, Greenleaf Publishing Ltd, Sheffield, 300 pages.

51. Chambers, Robert (1997), *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the Last First*, ITDG Publishing, London, 297 pages; also Chambers, Robert (2007), "From PRA to PLA and pluralism: practice and theory", Institute of Development Studies Working Paper 286, July, IDS, University of Sussex, UK.

52. Beebe, James (2001), *Rapid Assessment Process: An Introduction*, Alta Mica Press, Oxford, 214 pages.

53. See *The Economist* (2005), "The good company", 20 January, available at http://www.economist.com/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=3577141.

54. Hart, Stuart L and Sanjay Sharma (2004), "Engaging fringe stakeholders for competitive imagination", *Academy of Management Executive* Vol 18, No 1, pages 7–18.

55. See reference 2, Hart (2005).

56. During an interview with the CCS manager, he pointed out that CCS was "...the first professional and organized toilet cleaning business" in Kenya. (Interview October 2009.)

of urban slums. CCS provides a response to the lack of basic services, and by virtue of engaging with the vacuum left by the state and operating in areas where there is an "...absence of legal security in land ownership"⁽⁴⁸⁾ among slum dwellers, the business of CCS engages in the politics of sanitation and waste.

c. The Community Cleaning Services story

In 2005, SC Johnson agreed to sponsor the pilot for the Base of the Pyramid Protocol™ – a methodological roadmap for corporations to develop sustainable, culturally appropriate businesses to serve the needs of the poor.⁽⁴⁹⁾ SC Johnson's (SJC) historical commitment to environmental sustainability (as a company predominantly of chemists) was now embarking on a new journey, focused on the social aspects of sustainable enterprise.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Sponsoring the Base of the Pyramid Protocol™ pilot marked the beginning of a long-term commitment to explore innovative ways to deliver the benefits of SCJ products to previously unfamiliar markets in low-income communities, referred to among the business community as the BoP. This was in 2005, and the site selected for this experiment was Kenya. In the spirit of Robert Chambers-inspired participatory approaches,⁽⁵¹⁾ and drawing from rapid ethnographic methods,⁽⁵²⁾ the immersion phase of the Base of the Pyramid Protocol™ eventually resulted in a partnership between the "good company" SJC,⁽⁵³⁾ and micro-entrepreneurs in low-income settlements of Nairobi. Today, the partnership consists of SCJ selling high quality bulk cleaning products to Community Cleaning Services (CCS) (a locally registered Kenyan limited liability company), which then sells them onto local entrepreneurs who are independent members of CCS.

After nearly five years of BoP business development "engaging fringe stakeholders",⁽⁵⁴⁾ including shifts in business concept and personnel and the tumultuous sociopolitical climate following the contested 2007 presidential elections, CCS is no longer just an experiment or a project. It is a locally embedded business, providing professional cleaning services to community residents, focusing primarily on shared toilets and operating in more than 15 low-income settlements across Nairobi. Building on the spirit of participatory development, "trust-building" was perhaps the most significant challenge and platform on which a genuine partnership between seemingly disparate entities was forged. Significant to the story of CCS, and a testament to the "deep listening" of SCJ,⁽⁵⁵⁾ the actual idea of "cleaning toilets" came from the entrepreneurs themselves, who identified the opportunity to create a "professional and organized service"⁽⁵⁶⁾ that would target the shared residential resource of toilets.

CCS is impacting the lives of entrepreneurs by providing a viable source of income generation for young people in need of sustainable employment opportunities. Unlike most entrepreneurial endeavours, CCS presents little risk or up-front cost to the entrepreneurs, who buy products on consignment and whose teams are equipped with proper protective gear and tools – something they usually have no access to while conducting work in hazardous conditions. While respecting the organizational culture of young people in these communities (the expression "the *mtaani* way" often comes up to justify why certain behaviours, hand shakes and *sheng*⁽⁵⁷⁾ expressions are embedded into the business operations), CCS provides training in basic business skills and



PHOTO 1

Community Cleaning Services (CCS) operators getting ready to clean residential toilets in a “vertical” low-income settlement on the edge of Mathare. The attributes of “professionalism” frequently accorded to CCS workers by community members are in part linked to the uniform and protective equipment. There are usually no such “standardized” emblems of organization and branding among community-based enterprises. Indeed, CCS members often refer to walking through the *mtaani* on the way to cleaning jobs as a form of marketing.

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cleaning techniques, and has encouraged norms of compensation that privilege the person who does the cleaning job. This principle has become a central part of the CCS ethos, to address the formal and informal hierarchies within youth groups and the potential for conflict based on who ought to be paid.

The impact on customers is more complex. On the one hand, CCS offers high quality cleaning services to shared and community facilities that are poorly maintained and often in deplorable condition (e.g. fecal smears on walls, clogged toilets with days’ worth of waste piled high above a broad puddle of urine). The products used have strong disinfectant and odour control properties and have been shown to dramatically reduce the bacterial count around the toilets and sinks. Despite the indisputable value of the service and the provision of a “cleaner, safer toilet”, the price presents complications given the hand-to-mouth realities in the very areas where CCS seeks to build and grow its business operations. The typical cost per household is KES 20 per clean (US\$ 0.26). Many regular CCS customers ask the teams to come once a week. The justification of paying for “cleaner, safer toilets” therefore echoes the preventive health care

57. *Sheng* is the expression for colloquial Swahili – a mixture of Swahili, English and tribal languages. Often, each neighbourhood will have its own particular *sheng* style, a kind of “code”, particularly among the youth of that *mtaani*.

BOX 3 The cost dilemma

Most people in Mathare only have access to shared or community-based public toilets. The public toilet costs KES 3–5 per use (KES 5 is the standard price in every public toilet in the city and has been for at least a decade). On the one hand, it might be argued that paying KES 5 (US\$ 0.07) to visit the toilet is a high fee proportionate to the average income of urban poor residents. Let us consider that the average household living in Mathare includes 5–7 people, with one breadwinner who might earn anything between KES 100 and KES 300 a day. For example, a casual wage labourer working in the industrial area may earn up to KES 250 a day, but if you factor in transport costs (approximately KES 50–70) he’s probably bringing home KES 200 at the very most. A woman in Mathare washing clothes in Isli for a middle-class Somali family might earn between KES 100 and KES 200, with the advantage of being able to walk to her place of work. If one looks at a breakdown of most Mathare households’ daily budgets, a kilogramme of *unga* (maize meal) costs about KES 70. The cheapest and most commonly consumed vegetable, *sukumawiki* (kale, literally called “pushing the week”), costs about KES 15 a bunch. In most areas of Mathare where people live in shanty structures, the cost of water varies between KES 2 and KES 20 per 20-litre jerry can (higher in times of water shortage, especially during the dry season). So the minimum expenditure necessary to feed a family and have enough water for cooking, washing and bathing (a minimum of three jerry cans) amounts to about KES 100. Hence, KES 5 “to go for a short call” seems like a lot, and is why some of the people approached by Community Cleaning Services (CCS) might argue that KES 20 is simply too much for them that particular week.

On the other hand, let us consider what else in the community goes for KES 20. Coca-Cola™, the most deeply distributed product across all socioeconomic levels, sells myriad “cold drinks” in every kiosk in every neighbourhood of every slum. Each 300 millilitre bottle is sold for KES 20. It is often regarded as a treat or as a relatively cheap lunch replacement, but nevertheless, it is a sugary drink with little nutritional benefit and it costs KES 20.

Without suggesting that a clean toilet is a more “rational” economic choice than a Fanta™, I am only pointing to the fact that attesting to a “basic needs” claim is not a good enough reason for people of any income level to invest in a particular product or service – no matter how beneficial it may be. People’s desires will depend on their perceived needs and, especially when budgets are limited, budget allocation priorities are grounded in a series of habits that are not easily altered. When I asked a CCS entrepreneur or current CCS customer what it would take for others to consider CCS as something they would be willing to pay for, the response was often: *“People are ignorant and we have to change mindsets.”*

message of Unilever’s LifeBuoy campaign. When I interviewed various mothers in the communities, inquiring about frequency of diarrhoea episodes, the unanimous answer was that children contracted diarrhoea on a monthly basis. But as one health worker in Mathare insisted:

“I have lived here all my life and not gotten sick. But I always boil my water and we keep our residential toilet very clean. It is possible to be safe and healthy here, but you just have to be responsible.” (Mathare village 4A interview, March 2010.)

Although SCJ is involved in CCS at a financial and product level, the demand for the service and the meaning it has locally for the entrepreneurs and the customers is out of the company’s hands. On the one hand, the connection CCS has to the corporation has a legitimizing effect, often echoed in the local description of SCJ products as “the sweet-smelling perfume” and the CCS teams in their uniforms as “professional and organized”. On the other hand, the application of the products and the social life of the service have become indigenized.

The face of the company is the “sweet-smelling” product and SCJ brand, but the organizational personality is CCS. SCJ’s encounter with the community-based entrepreneurs has tapped into the subjectivities and identities of the local entrepreneurs and the community-based customers, which has informed a particular kind of grassroots capitalism and created a new kind of market culture.⁽⁵⁸⁾

CCS entrepreneurs equate CCS with job creation for youth and speak of the value of “earning an honest living”. Many key informants admit that their past habits included alcohol abuse, drugs and petty crime. In the early 2000s, when some youth groups were starting to collect garbage in their area, waste management involved scare tactics and tended to be related to gang activities, and being high on the job was not uncommon. But as one CCS entrepreneur put it, “...you can be drunk when you collect garbage, but you can’t be drunk when you clean a toilet.” Another distinguishing aspect of CCS is the conception of operational boundaries. For garbage collectors, each group has its “base”, a notion often evoked by urban gangs to describe their informally defined territory. No group operating in one base dares collect garbage in another’s base. However, it was openly agreed at the January 2010 entrepreneurs’ general meeting that when it comes to CCS, “there are no boundaries”. During individual interviews, entrepreneurs talked about the “healthy competition” of having other CCS members working in their area.

At its most fundamental, CCS is a new type of SCJ customer, delivering toilet-cleaning services in low-income communities and thus creating positive value for entrepreneurs and consumers. SCJ is forthcoming about the business motivation serving as a foundation of its “co-creation” and support of CCS, but it is couched in “patient capital”⁽⁵⁹⁾ and the corporation’s commitment to “...bring sustainable livelihoods to the community while at the same time bringing sustainable new business to the company.”⁽⁶⁰⁾

Vis à vis the entrepreneurs and the communities, SCJ’s role is one part of CCS’s organizational identity. CCS is not perceived on the ground as a “corporate social responsibility” project and, after considerable and conscious effort by the CCS management team, it is no longer thought of as an “NGO thing”.⁽⁶¹⁾ It is increasingly part of the complex and dynamic context where income-poor urban youth, entrepreneurship and waste are intersecting. While CCS is still a small operation, with 10 teams in Nairobi, of which five work in Mathare, it is said to be unique in terms of its sanitation offering, its commitment to empowering young people to improve the cleanliness of toilets in their communities, and its aim to seed a community movement to “change mindsets” around sanitation. As portrayed by the new CCS tagline (agreed by CCS entrepreneurs at a recent CCS general meeting): *Usafi ni Power* (Sanitation is Power).

V. GARBAGE COLLECTION AND PLASTICS RECYCLING

a. Waste has many lives

This research reveals that CCS is considered not only a viable source of livelihood creation but also a “movement”.⁽⁶²⁾ In the areas in which CCS teams operate on a consistent basis, the “cleaning service” is equated not only with clean toilets but also with increasing dignity in the community

58. For further discussion on imagined “sustainable” and alternative forms of capitalism, see Hawken, Paul (1993), *The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability*, HarperBusiness, New York, 272 pages; also Hawken, Paul, Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins (1999), *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, New York and London, 379 pages.

59. “Patient capital” is capital invested for the long term without expectation of immediate returns.

60. “Understanding the Base of the Pyramid”, available at http://www.scjohnson.com/environment/creating_11.asp.

61. CCS member interview, October 2009.

62. For further reference to “social movements”, see Della Porta, Donatella and Mario Diani (2006), *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Second Edition, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 356 pages.

63. For further reading on this, refer to Caroline Moser's discussion on how the poor are "managers of complex asset portfolios" in Moser, Caroline (1998), "Reassessing urban poverty reduction strategies: the asset vulnerability framework", *World Development* Vol 26, No 1, pages 1–19.

64. Interview in Mathare 10, January 2010.

and even de facto youth mentorship and esteem-building. Most teams still hold onto their other sources of income as well, forming an expanding "portfolio"⁽⁶³⁾ of income-generating activities including garbage collection and plastics recycling. In the face of mass unemployment and insecurity for urban youth, this may be seen as a form of risk diversification in an urban culture of plural and collective entrepreneurship. But it also points to the perceived confluence of various forms of waste and the entrepreneurial opportunities inherent in this "commodity".

In the communities, the commonly used term *usafi* combines the concepts of sanitation, hygiene and cleanliness. In other words, integral to the everyday concerns about the local urban environment is the notion of "waste" writ large, including both human and solid waste. Examining the significance of one leads to inquiry about the other. As one young man put it, "...what good is it if these NGOs come in and construct toilets if people use the toilet area as a dumping site for their garbage?"⁽⁶⁴⁾ Although the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of human and solid waste overlap considerably, the policies and interventions concerning waste often conceptually and practically separate "garbage" from "shit".

Solid waste is visible and public. Piles of uncollected refuse alongside the Nairobi River form a sort of tapestry over walkways; and most hazardous, they provide the grounds where children play, defecate or search for scraps of food. Human waste, conversely, is less publicly visible and a matter of private and personal practice. Yet, the open sewers,



PHOTO 2

A youth group in Mathare gathering collected plastics from their neighbourhood. The process involves collection, sorting, weighing, transporting, shredding, bagging and selling.

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the odours and the alarming proximity between toilets, open sewers, footpaths, areas of play, residences and people render “shit” a matter of public concern.

A decade ago, the enterprise of waste was laden with social stigma, interlaced with gang-related crime and scare tactics, considered a last resort and associated with hopelessness and filth. Today, in contrast, waste management is recognized as a viable source of livelihood creation and acceptable work in the communities. Many youth claim that they actively choose to be self-employed and managing waste rather than looking for wage labour to “...*be someone else’s donkey*.”⁽⁶⁵⁾ This research suggests that the “business of waste” is creating a platform for political mobilization, contesting the vacuum of state provision and, as one young man put it, “...*showing the government that we can provide what they have failed to*.”⁽⁶⁶⁾ This de-stigmatization has surely been accelerated by the fact that waste management in the *mtaa* is now a growing business. One entrepreneur recently claimed he earns up to 11,000 KES (US\$ 142) a month from garbage collection and plastics recycling. Another young entrepreneur explained: “*One kilogramme of plastics sells for 10 Shillings. If you shred the plastics the value rises to 18 Shillings (US\$ 0.23). So you see, waste is gold*.”⁽⁶⁷⁾

It is therefore no surprise that *Taka ni Pato* (Trash is Cash), the NGO project that helped establish garbage collection for youth group income generation in the early 2000s, has become integral to contemporary parlance when it comes to discourses of waste in the city. The business of waste is at once a reflection of excessive consumption and leveraging of discarded materials as a resource to be re-used for domestic purposes, composted for urban farming, and re-purposed and sold to companies in the industrial area. It is at once a critique of modernity, an enabler of innovation, and a source of livelihood and environmental consciousness.⁽⁶⁸⁾

The work of the entrepreneurs I have come to know in Mathare exemplifies a vibrant grassroots effort to contest the failure of the state while providing a valuable service to their communities. In this sense the agency of youth displays a combination of enterprise, service and politics. Chatterjee’s⁽⁶⁹⁾ notion of “political society” provides a helpful conceptual tool for re-thinking the space within which the urban poor articulate and manifest their rights. Davis depicts the “poor” as unrecognized citizens whose urban “place” forces them outside of “civil society”.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Echoing Durkheim’s notion of “anomie”, Davis refers to “urban anomie” to describe the state violence and unsafe environments

65. Interview in Mlango Kubwa, February 2010.

66. Interview in Huruma, December 2009.

67. Interview in Mlango Kubwa, November 2009.

68. It is common to hear young people talking about the issues of environment in their communities as a “climate change” concern.

69. Chatterjee, Partha (2004), *The Politics of the Governed*, Columbia University Press, NY, 167 pages.

70. Davis, Mike (2006), *Planet of Slums*, Verso, London, 256 pages.

BOX 4

“We’ve been doing garbage collection for 10 years. Garbage collection has grown and our environment has improved! When you look around here, you’ll see it is clean. Back in 2001, 2002, we had a big challenge because of the big heaps of garbage. So we didn’t manage to catch the big plots. But now we have managed to get those heaps and collect all the garbage around. Back then, we didn’t work with city council for collection, we used to take it near the river. We have a very big dumping site there. But now we partner with the city council, we pay them and they come to collect it. So you see now we are not disposing our garbage near the river. We take the garbage to the major dumping site in the city instead of dumping it in our backyard.” (Interview, Huruma, October 2009.)



PHOTO 3

Collected waste in one of Mathare's neighbouring estates in Starehe constituency. This pile of garbage sitting in the middle of a main street consists of all the unusable, un-recyclable materials, and remains there until it is collected by a city council lorry and taken to the main Nairobi dumping site in Dandora, Embakasi constituency.

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71. See reference 70, page 196.

that, combined, define the perpetual struggle of slum dwellers.⁽⁷¹⁾ The notion of “political society” shifts the emphasis from struggle (of victims) to protest (of agents). If the urban poor inhabit the contested space of “political society”, where tensions are negotiated and identity politics are performed and realized, then these marginalized groups who are refused formal citizenship and rights (otherwise accorded to civil society) carve out a meaningful space for self-realization and mobilization through an alternative political space. For youth in Mathare, that political space is the “business of waste”.

Many youth consider CCS an alternative to controversial government programmes such as Kazi Kwa Vijana. CCS has become, along with community-led waste management practices, a mechanism for defining the claim of a right to work in terms that appeal to youth in low-income settlements – through self-employment and entrepreneurship. As one young man asserted in a focus group discussion:

“Business (as in self-employment) is freedom. You are not someone else’s donkey, enriching someone else’s enterprise. You work for yourself and treat your own workers (the guys you grew up with) as partners.” (Interview, Mathare Environmental Youth Group, Mlango Kubwa, January 2010.)

VI. CONCLUSIONS

As I investigate the case of solid and human waste management “from below” in Mathare, my mid-stage ethnographic research is unearthing entrepreneurial models that provide a creative and responsive alternative to (lacking) state provision of basic services. These community-based services put a series of binaries into question: the lines between “formal” and “informal” economy, “legitimate” and “illegitimate” work, “employment” and “entrepreneurship” are blurred, contested and shifted. Furthermore, I am scrutinizing normative assumptions regarding waste as “matter out of place”, as “resource and income opportunity”, and as a platform for political claims made by marginalized urban dwellers coupling coping mechanisms with innovative entrepreneurial strategies to create a sense of improvement from the inside-out.

When I started my PhD, examining the underlying assumptions of corporate-led, market-based approaches to poverty alleviation, I was particularly interested in unpacking how this new kind of development proposition puts forward particular moral narratives (attesting to “basic needs” arguments and corporate social responsibility) while purporting to offer a cosmopolitan and universal appeal.⁽⁷²⁾ During my initial fieldwork, however, I realized that understanding the perspectives of people directly and indirectly involved in CCS (customers and entrepreneurs) would entail much more than “...seeking out the voices of the Base of the Pyramid” as Ted London refers to it.⁽⁷³⁾ The business and poverty literature and its conceptual foundation are grounded in a primarily company-centric point of view, and are generally “thin” in their description of the critical cultural and political context. My research examines the broader sociopolitical context in which BoP businesses are situated: How are market-based poverty alleviation initiatives shaped and how do they respond to the complicated relationship between the state, markets and the urban poor?

Reflecting on how “informality” has been framed in relation to low-income economies –namely by negation – Satterthwaite, Appadurai, Pieterse and Roitman provide useful supporting perspectives.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Despite their different disciplinary traditions, each of these authors also emphasizes what is there – urging a reconceptualization of poverty. Referring to the negative information about Africa frequently circulated in the popular media and among investors, James Ferguson writes: “...such perceptions don’t just misunderstand social reality; they also shape it.”⁽⁷⁵⁾ My ethnographic research provides an alternative narrative to what is “lacking” or “failing”, focusing on what is working and on the existing social and community structures that provide entry points for positive transformative change: How have “poverty” narratives shaped and been shaped by the recent propagation and celebration of market-based approaches to poverty alleviation?

The grassroots management of waste in Nairobi’s informal settlements such as Mathare challenges the “apocalyptic view”⁽⁷⁶⁾ of so-called “slums” that Davis⁽⁷⁷⁾ and others describe, pointing instead to the “capabilities” and knowledge of the poor as manifest through community-based enterprise.⁽⁷⁸⁾ The grassroots market-based initiatives that focus on waste management have become productive entry points for innovative forms of “mobilization from below”,⁽⁷⁹⁾ rendering the “business of waste” a form of livelihood creation but also a “local mode of resistance”,⁽⁸⁰⁾ and hence a political platform for low-income urban youth to reclaim their “right to the city”.

72. For an excellent anthropological critique of the “moral narratives” of corporate social responsibility, see Welker, Marina (2009), “Corporate security begins in the community: mining, the corporate social responsibility industry and environmental advocacy in Indonesia”, *Cultural Anthropology* Vol 24, Issue 1, pages 142–179.

73. See reference 19, London (2006).

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