



“Like we don’t have enough on our hands already!”: the story of the Kenyan slum youth federation

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ABSTRACT Slum dweller federations, like many other social movements, cater for the youth in their constituencies. This is critical to their relevance as agents of change and contributes to the sustainability of the movements. However, the youth formations are not merely scaled-down versions of the movements and often grapple with a set of dynamics unique to that transitory period in life. This story is a case study of the youth federation that is aligned to Kenya’s slum dwellers federation.

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In September 2010, at the age of 25, John Te went on a plane for the first time in his life, on a trip from Kenya to Ghana about which he was excited. Te lives in a ten-by-ten foot shack made of corrugated sheets of iron and with an earth floor. Its once-painted wooden door has cracks running down to where the wooden planks meet. The door opens inwards to a dark and muddy two-foot wide passage. If the door opened outwards it would knock into the row of similar shacks on the other side of the passage or would scrape the drooping roof overhang above the passage.

At the airport, Te’s passport would have borne the name John Thuo. Initially, “Te” was a street name, but then became the only name by which John is known in the Nairobi slum where he lives. If anyone at the airport had asked Te about the purpose of his trip, they would have been surprised by his answer. A lanky young man, with three of his upper front teeth missing, he has a mug shot face if ever there was one. Te’s answer would indeed have been hard to believe, given his hooded top, sagging jeans and mud-caked sports shoes.

Te went to Ghana to train in database management. After frequent arrests in his mid-teens, Te has become the “data guy” of Muungano wa Wanavijiji, the Kenyan federation of slum dwellers. The federation is part of the global network of slum dweller movements known as Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI). One thing the federations do consistently is collect information on the slums where they have a presence – a ritual they call enumerations. They count shacks and document the presence of people who otherwise remain invisible in formal records. This information is used to negotiate with local authorities for security of land tenure and services.⁽¹⁾

In 2002, members of the Indian and South African slum dweller federations came to teach their Kenyan peers how to undertake an

1. See Karanja, Irene (2010), “An enumeration and mapping of informal settlements in Kisumu, Kenya, implemented by their inhabitants”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 22, No 1, April, pages 217–239; also Weru, Jane (2004), “Community federations and city upgrading: the work of Pamoja Trust and Muungano in Kenya”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 16, No 1, April, pages 47–62.

enumeration. Among the communities interested in this was Kambi Moto, the small slum from which Te comes. At the time, he was too young and wayward to be part of the exercise. As a result of the enumeration, Kambi Moto community negotiated for, and was granted, tenure rights by the city council of Nairobi. Today, the settlement is transforming – residents have replaced 86 of its 270 shacks with 35-square metre stone houses with electricity and plumbing. Te's shack will be among the next group of 100 units to be upgraded.

While the Kambi Moto housing makeover is striking, it is the change in the youth outlook in Kambi Moto that is truly fascinating. Te testifies that a few years ago he was such a pincher of people's things that even his mum would have to hide on herself any money she had whenever he was in the house. Today, he works at a car wash that the community set up; he's saving to get a house construction loan from the federation; he builds databases for enumerations taking place in slums across the country; he maintains the federation's website; and he mentors a group of 5-to-14-year old kids in Kambi Moto. And there are a dozen other young people like him in the settlement, for example Kevin, aka Ngomo, who dropped out of school when his mother was unable to pay the fees. Today he's a budding micro-entrepreneur and manages a competitive under-14 girls' football team; he also pays his mother's house loan. Then there is Eric, who has acquired masonry skills and is engaged in building houses in the community; he also manages a theatre and dance troupe for kids on Saturdays and during the school holidays. And there is Tony, John, Joyce, Njeri...

As the support agency⁽²⁾ for both the youth federation and the Muungano federation, people at Muungano Support Trust (MUST) often ask themselves: "*Did we succeed?*" And it is indeed a conundrum.

When the youth federation emerged in 2003, the Muungano federation had been in existence for seven years. It consisted of 250 savings schemes in as many slums in Nairobi and in nine other towns in Kenya. Muungano was institutionalizing its practices: changing slum community governance by forming slum-based savings schemes that took up the slum upgrading role; changing the nature of slum/government engagement by undertaking enumerations and negotiating for the delivery of services; building models of housing and service delivery through a growing number of housing, water and sanitation projects; and all the while maintaining, and indeed succeeding in, its zero-tolerance stance towards forced slum eviction. The last thing the federation was thinking about was low youth participation in its activities – after all the youth were a constant nuisance to be dealt with by parents, teachers and the police.

The idea for a youth federation was inspired by the enumeration of a small settlement of 67 households. In the month between data collection and community verification of the data, three young men had died: one had committed suicide; one had died of HIV/AIDS-related diseases; and one had been stabbed by other slum youth on his way home after a drinking binge.

The MUST programme officer supporting enumerations, Kimani Joseph, started talking to the young people, and quickly realized that there was a gap in slum communities that Muungano was not particularly interested in filling. Kimani began to organize football tournaments between youth from different slums; he brought in any willing professional he could find to speak to them, about anything; and he organized music and theatre competitions. He got himself onto widely recognized national youth bodies such as the Youth Parliament and the Youth Council. These youth structures were dominated by

2. It is common practice for the federations in different countries, which together form Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), to have a support NGO working with them locally, providing some of the liaison with international donors and the development world.

the children of political and business leaders in the country, and participation in these fora became the slum youth's first big goal.

At the slum level, the youth organized themselves into junior councils that discussed various issues, for example how they could gain access to football pitches in neighbouring schools. When the annual Youth Council elections came around that year, for the first time slum youth showed up in great numbers and elected their own for all the posts, including junior mayor. A 17-year-old girl from Mathare slum ended up with an office next to the city mayor's; never mind that with no agenda and with very little support from anyone, she quickly became bored with the position and abandoned the office.

Yet this loose slum youth movement came with loads of positive energy – they continued to stay busy with a seemingly random array of activities, including beauty pageants, a slum newspaper and neighbourhood clean-ups. Kimani's employment contract made no mention of youth; his job was to support the Muungano federation but, as the demand for enumerations and projects grew, so did the demand on his time by the youth. He cajoled and drew in every other programme officer into supporting some youth activity. He also wrung every loose penny out of organizational budgets and was quite miffed when the youth only got a one-paragraph mention in the annual report. Irritated by Kimani asking that he give up yet another weekend to the youth, colleague and programme officer Francis Gitau griped: *"He just had to go out and bring in this youth thing, like we don't have enough on our hands already!"*

And so the youth fire raged on, almost haphazardly it seemed. From its beginnings in a couple of slums, the movement spread to slums in four of the city's eight divisions, and the youth called it "Mwamko wa Vijana" ("Youth Awakening"). At one time, they organized a month-long football tournament for 544 under-12 children from slums across the city, who were kitted out and equipped by the country's leading newspaper, the Daily Nation. The older youth negotiated to become newspaper vendors, and some of them managed to get journalists and advertising agents from the paper to help them put together their own slum newspaper.

Great as the energy was, it was also felt that this movement needed to be consolidated into some coherent, fundable entity. Kimani himself had been born in a slum and had been encouraged to stay at school; he subsequently broke out of the slum with the support of the mentoring he received in a church youth group. He bequeathed the mentoring legacy to Mwamko. His philosophy is that when you mentor, it compels you to become a role model for those you mentor. Whatever else they contrived to do, all the Mwamko youth were each mentoring three or four children, aged between four and 12. Mothers in the slum became the movement's biggest supporters. Mentoring was the first and strongest element of the movement's journey to institutionalization.

Three years after it had been initiated, and now a specific item on MUST's fundraising agenda, Mwamko's members came together for one week in August 2006 to figure out what was this thing that they had formed. There seemed to be no single primary group identity – it was the football team, the acrobatic and dance troupes, the study group, the waste collection business. They added: *"We do not have to change this to be federated. We share issues in common that we can federate around – education, recreation, income generation and mentoring."*

That same year they set up a fund called “Kuboostiana”, a Kenyan slang term for giving each other a boost. The fund promoted groups to start making footballs and handicrafts. With the support of the Ford Foundation, Mwamko was encouraged to take numerous slum waste collection groups a step further into waste recycling, in a programme they dubbed “Taka ni Pato”, meaning “waste is cash”.⁽³⁾ Learning visits to Egypt, India and South Africa were made. A couple of months into the programme, groups were producing more than two tonnes of organic compost every week. A network of 15 waste collection groups in two divisions of the city coalesced and bought a plastic shredder and went into business selling plastic pellets to plastic goods manufacturers.

Ironically, Mwamko, unlike Muungano, remained a very fluid entity. Muungano had by then established local and citywide networks with clear operating systems. You can trace Muungano’s growth quite easily. Mwamko, on the other hand, was bedevilled by the continuous haemorrhaging of its members. Some got formal jobs, some went off to college, some were shot by the police – usually while committing a crime – some just left. Some groups formalized into real businesses and some dissipated when they lost key members. Members of the support trust realized that youth is a fleeting moment. Unlike Muungano, Mwamko would need to redefine itself every year – and whatever investments were made would move on along with the young people, wherever they went. In a moment of frustration at the loss of a key youth mentor, Jane Weru, then executive director of the support trust, consoled a Mwamko programme officer with the words: “*Maybe it’s enough that we keep them off the streets in their formative years.*”

The prospect of renewing the youth federation every year is a daunting task. You find a small shy girl, you walk with her for a year and she grows into an articulate young woman with good skills. Her dancing troupe excels and she mentors some children; and then one day you wake up and she’s gone. You wake up the next day and find a small naughty boy. Perhaps you start to think “*I have enough on my hands already!*” The frustration may have started to grow, but each year there are new youth coming in, charged up and so compelling in their aspirations that you have little choice but to do it again.

Around 2008, something unexpected started to happen. The children who had been mentored in 2003 and 2004 started taking up the movement – the John Te generation had come of age. It is comforting to know that by the time the Te generation move on to other things, and they will definitely move on, they will have mentored another generation. Maybe Mwamko will never quite institutionalize in the way Muungano has, or any other organization does. And maybe institutionalization is not the same thing as growth and maybe it is not even necessary for sustainability. Yet how do you tell anyone, and especially anyone who has made investments, that the litany of defunct football teams, theatre groups and waste management businesses are actually a resounding success? “*So, did we succeed?*”

3. The last issue of *Environment and Urbanization* included another interesting paper on the topic of waste as cash; see Thieme, Tatiana (2010), “Youth, waste and work in Mathare: whose business and whose politics?”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 22, No 2, October, pages 333–352.

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