

From the depths of an African shantytown, a nascent youth employment movement grows

In Africa's second largest slum, youth unemployment is sky high. But cooperative projects are helping youth find work and slowly lift themselves out of poverty through such projects as raising food in community gardens, processing waste for bio-fuel or providing improved sanitation. Journalist Anne Holmes reports on how this emerging economic revival is making a small but significant dent in a major ongoing challenge.
FTR/KiberaSlum

KIBERA, Kenya (ILO Online) – Deep within the labyrinth of this bustling informal settlement's infinite network of footpaths, a young man tends to rows of plants in a small community greenhouse. He is a member of a group of youths that also runs a water kiosk, a chair rental business and a public bathhouse with pay per use latrines.

Meanwhile, on the slum's main street, young men wash cars with buckets of water hauled from a nearby creek at warp speed.

During post-election violence three years ago, youths were tearing up the railroad tracks that run through Kibera, furious over the lack of jobs and sky-high unemployment. Thousands of idle youths took to the streets to disrupt and burn the businesses and houses of perceived members of the economically advantaged.

Today, residents have rebuilt their communities, and the hustle and bustle within the informal settlement has shifted from frustrated violence to productive work. However, employment remains a huge challenge particularly among the youth – a point that analysts are studying closely as the country gears up for new elections next year.

Kibera is at the fault line of the youth employment crisis with an estimated 80 per cent of young people without work. According to the GET Youth Report, the 2010 youth unemployment rate was an estimated 12,7 per cent, while some countries, notably in northern and Sub-Saharan Africa have rates of 40 per cent or more. For 2011, the global rate is expected to be at 12,6 per cent.

What happens in Kibera is a microcosm of what needs to take place everywhere –either find jobs for youth or risk the consequences. Acknowledging the need to focus renewed energy on youth employment, the ILO is gearing up for a year of youth oriented projects and activities in 2012 designed to mobilize support for plans aimed at promoting the creation of jobs for youth globally.

In the community greenhouse, Victor Matioli, 34, already has a project in place that is creating jobs for youth. He explains how the Youth Reform Greenhouse Organic Farm came into being. "Since the post-election violence, is the day that we started farming. We came with the idea of joining the youths together and rehabilitating them to do good things."

Out on Kibera's main artery, the car wash business is teeming with energy. Gabriel Owino manages the co-operative enterprise he started with a group of friends 10 years ago and also oversees a mechanics shop next to the spring.

"These people have their own qualifications for work. Some come and go and get good jobs," he says. "There are people who are going to school. There are people who are having certificates here, and they don't have jobs so we keep ourselves busy, out of (the) streets."

One of the main challenges in these settlements is the lack of proper sanitation services. "Flying toilets," polyurethane bags used for defecation and thrown by the wayside, pollute the landscape, and the lack of proper sewage systems lead to public latrines becoming blocked, often overflowing when the rains come.

"The major problem in Kibera is toilets and showers," says Mr. Matioli. "People don't have them."

This gap in public service has stimulated one of the more stable employment opportunities for Kibera residents who decided to take matters into their own hands.

The Umande Trust, an organization sponsored by the ILO's Cooperative Facility for Africa through its Challenge Fund, is one of the most innovative groups involved. They employ largely youth or women groups to build and operate what they call "bio centres," public latrines that use bio-base from processed human waste to heat water for the public showers. The gas is also sold to local residents for cooking.

"We are looking now at the human waste as an investment that can produce bio-gas, and this is a clean form of energy. We are able to harness that and ensure that we are providing a dignified, clean form of sanitation services to the community," says Paul Muchire, Communications Manager at Umande Trust. "Remember this is methane, and methane is more harmful than carbon, therefore, when you burn that methane you reduce the degree of harm it will cause to the environment."

Umande has over 50 similar centres throughout Kenya that are run by independent community groups. Most of them are located within Nairobi's informal settlements.

"In terms of economic empowerment of the community itself, this facility requires a caretaker. So that's a job created," continues Mr. Muchire. Most of them will require at least two caretakers who work in shifts. A third person is employed to do the cleaning and maintenance so at a minimum, the ground floor itself creates three permanent positions.

On the second floor of the bio centre is a space that can be used for other profit-making endeavours. Some are rented out as public halls or offices. Others have been converted into hotel rooms. After salaries and dividends, employees are encouraged to deposit 10 percent in a revolving fund at the Umande Savings and Credit Co-operative (SACCO), which can later be tapped into for a loan to build another sanitation facility.

"Our starting point is that Kibera has assets – people go to school, there is radio, they have cyber cafes, there is Internet," says Managing Trustee Josiah Omotto, who founded the organization with a group of friends in 2004. "We've tried to move away from the Kibera of poverty, because the moment we look at people from a poverty perspective, you are basically perpetuating helplessness."

Mr. Omotto explains that over the last ten years, employment has been based on social capital. "You know somebody, you get a job", he adds. "In the high-income areas, unemployment is very low because they know people in the private sector, they know people in the public sector".

However, Kibera residents and those of the other informal settlements in Nairobi are largely excluded from that economic sector. They survive by going from one small job to the next, selling food at stalls in the streets or hawking recycled goods. Steady income remains an exception.

"Umande Trust basically means nascent. Looking at the world with a new beginning. Not recycling the ideas of yesterday," says Mr. Omotto, "We really are about justice."

Adds Maria-Elena Chavez, Chief of the ILO Cooperative Branch, "SACCO members are very committed and co-ops have made a very visible contribution to their well-being. Walking through Kibera, members of the SACCO proudly showed us their bio centre, their accounts and the savings they had, telling us how their children could go to school because they were able to access small loans from the SACCO to buy school uniforms. This is a very impressive example of how co-ops and youth can make a huge difference in people's lives."