

'The rich man's road': Nairobi slum demolished for highway

Thursday 20 September 2018, by [GOLLA Rajiv](#) (Date first published: 20 August 2018).

A road project has taken the homes of 2,000 families without compensation - yet over half of Kenyans travel on foot

Early on Sunday morning on the outskirts of Nairobi, hundreds of people gathered amid the rubble where their church once stood. Pastors preached atop bare foundations. Worshipers, dressed in their Sunday best, sat on shattered bricks and broken concrete. Pamphlets, family photos and school papers littered the ground.

Days before, they had watched as bulldozers tore through their neighbourhood, mowing down churches, schools and businesses, to make way for a highway extension that aims to ease Nairobi's notoriously bad traffic congestion. The new road will pass through the heart of Kibera, the largest informal settlement in [Africa](#), where many of the homes are built from mud bricks and corrugated metal, and house some of the capital's poorest people.

Two thousand families were forcibly evicted in the demolitions. There has been no offer of compensation or plans made for resettlement.

"Is this a free country? Why are they chasing away their citizens without telling them where they should go?" asks Elijah Musembi, a metalworker who has lived here since the 1980s. "Of what use am I to this country?"

"Progress is good. We are not refusing that," adds Jackson Muindo, 25, who lost his home in the demolition and now sleeps outside. "But this is not progress. This is being taken advantage of."

In recent years, Kenya's economy has grown rapidly. Since 2000, [GDP has increased five-fold to \\$75bn in 2017](#). But in that same period the number of people in [severe poverty increased by 10%](#), leaving many Kenyans to feel they have been left out of the boom. And the road project is a particular sticking point, given that more than [half of Kenyans still walk](#) to where they need to go.

"It will not benefit us, we don't have cars. It will benefit the rich men," Bryan Matisa, 28, says as he stares out over the wreckage of the school where he once worked. The demolitions came just days before end-of-term exams, leaving hundreds of children in the lurch. "The road is not more important than the children. They should have let the children finish school."

A [2018 study by the Overseas Development Institute](#) warned that Kenya's push to build new roads, a popular political platform on the campaign trail, has come at the expense of safety.

"More than half of all road deaths take place on the handful of new roads, and the poorest - those who walk, cycle, and use motorcycles - make up more than 90% of the fatalities on the roads," says Avi Silverman, deputy director of the FIA Foundation, a philanthropic organisation that promotes global road safety.

Research has also shown that new roads don't necessarily mitigate congestion, and can exacerbate it. "Disproportionate investment in road building over safe, sustainable public transport, or measures to provide protection for those who walk or cycle, fuels the demand for private vehicles, which creates further congestion," Silverman says.

With the battle for their homes lost, residents in Kibera are now demanding compensation. The Kenya Urban Roads Authority (KURA), the government body managing the project, has taken [a defiant stance against compensating the evictees](#), whom they consider to be squatters on government land.

The Kenyan constitution does offer some support to occupiers who are removed from their land. Consultations with local community groups has led to an agreement in principle for compensation, but no details have been announced, let alone delivered.

Kibera has long had a precarious relationship with the government. When Nairobi was founded in 1899 as the colonial capital, it [was segregated along racial lines](#): white settlers in the centre, Indian traders beside them, and migrant African labour far outside, in the surrounding forest. Those migrant camps soon became bustling informal settlements, of which Kibera was the largest and oldest. Kibera was initially settled by any [southern Sudanese soldiers](#) recruited into the British colonial King's African Rifles regiment: when they retired, their pension included a permit to live on this vast government tract. Those permits were traded and sold, serving as unofficial title deeds.

However, as Kibera grew over the decades, the government made several failed attempts to demolish the site and resettle the residents. In the 1990s, it began a programme of "slum upgrading", but the projects were accused of being corrupt and ineffective, serving mainly to displace existing residents and increase tenant costs.

Residents began demanding more autonomy to develop their properties themselves. In 2017, the Nubian community, descendants of the original Sudanese soldiers, [secured a title deed](#) for 116 hectares (288 acres) of Kibera to be placed into a community trust. The rest of Kibera, however, remains in a precarious position on government land that can be reclaimed at any time.

Politicians have exacerbated the tensions in Kibera over the years. With the introduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s, Kibera became a hotbed of ethnic mobilisation and the site of some of the worst violence in the 2007 elections. That the demolitions came almost exactly one year after the heated 2017 general election was not lost on residents.

"We voted for these politicians but they are not helping us," says Esther Muli, the founder and headteacher of Makina Self Help primary school in Nairobi. "They get an office and they just sit inside. But when they want their votes, their cars are going all over the place. They came here and did a lot of politicking, but, one year later, I don't see anybody."

KURA has already put out eviction notices to other sites across Nairobi to be demolished to make way for the road, pushing people to gather their belongings and leave before compensation or resettlement plans are made.

Meanwhile, outside Nairobi, 8,000 people have been forced from their homes in Mau Forest, ostensibly to protect an important water catchment area from deforestation and overgrazing. Critics say the evictions are a political strategy to shift support in the upcoming 2022 elections, with farmers and herders caught in the middle.

"It's not just us - and it's not just roads," Muli says. "Kenyans must protect themselves from their leaders."

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