

Young Planning Professionals Workshop, 15 – 18 September 2010, Nairobi, Kenya

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The Young Planning Professionals workshop in Nairobi was an enriching experience in more ways than one. It provided me with an opportunity for professional development through participation in an urban planning studio that was aimed at integrating Kibera, the largest slum in East Africa, into the surrounding neighbourhoods within Nairobi city. This was realised through analysing the ongoing project of the national Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme (KENSUP). The objectives of the studio included our integration as young planners from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds. It also included our exposure to the global challenges facing urban and regional settings all over the world and planners' responses towards them.

The urban studio provided insights at a number of levels; first was familiarisation with the site through a couple of site visits so as to establish its relation to its environs. What became obvious from the visits was the sense of ownership which this slum up-grading project had managed to develop amongst the slum dwellers. Prior to attending the workshop I had watched a documentary on the ongoing slum upgrading project in Kibera that was cast during the initial phases of the KENSUP Kibera project. The documentary had depicted the slum dwellers attitude towards the project as being resistant and reluctant towards its inception. It was therefore a very different perception of the slum dwellers' attitudes towards the project that we found on the ground especially within the pilot project area of Soweto East where we managed to visit and where the initial beneficiaries have already been relocated to the first phase of the decanting site situated in the neighbouring Langata estate.

A second discovery which the site visit afforded was the realisation of the extent to which the slum had been socially fragmented following the impact of the 2007 post-election violence. The underlying political tensions, though not explicitly revealed through the slum-upgrading project reports, are still present and continue to cut across Kibera's landscape. Although KENSUP's initiative of establishing communal sanitation blocks is seeking to foster a certain level of social cohesion among the slum-dwellers through their communal management system, the efforts are limited in building bridges across the various villages represented across Kibera. Even so, informal settlements all across the country continue to be the most vulnerable sites of political and national ethnic tensions and the need for resolution of ethnic fragmentation not just in the slums but across the country needs to be addressed holistically.

A third insight I gained from a follow-up visit to Kibera was the slum-dwellers failure to set up a community record base of the slum-upgrading process. The officials of Kibera settlement executive committee acknowledged that there had been numerous lessons and skills gained in the ongoing slum upgrading project which they unfortunately had not been able to document since the project's inception. There had been lessons learnt ranging from conflict resolution to conducting socio-economic mapping, for the purpose of issuing the slum-dwellers with household identity cards in order to safe-guard the legal beneficiaries of the units, which had not been shared across other slums throughout the project's process. This is a weak part of a number of slum-upgrading initiatives where cross-learning across the slums in Kenya still needs further development.

All in all the social networking as well as the academic learning experiences that were afforded to me through this workshop were highly valuable. I found the opportunity of working alongside a very gifted young and professional planning team, from the local context as well as from various places across the world, to be a very fruitful experience.