Young people responding to multiple crises: intersecting precarities and everyday life in an informal settlement in Kenya.
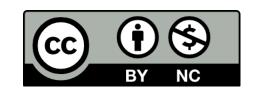
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Young people responding to multiple "crises": intersecting precarities and everyday life in an informal settlement in Kenya

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Introduction

Informal settlements, while being home to about 1 in 8 people worldwide, face many interconnected challenges relating to housing, services, health, employment, ecological vulnerabilities and legal marginalisation. Young people living in informal contexts are particularly vulnerable to crises and challenges due to their restricted access to power, finance and forms of social capital. At the same time, informal settlements are often said to be spaces of creativity, entrepreneurship, innovation and resilience. This chapter presents the findings of qualitative fieldwork in an informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, since 2020, particularly exploring the activities of a group of young environmentalists and their strategies to cope with diverse and interlinked acute and structural challenges. Residents of the informal settlement face many challenges and chronic stresses, including high levels of pollution, crime and violence, unemployment, and the conditions commonly associated with informality, such as no or little access to water, sanitation and essential public services and infrastructure. In addition to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change have also been increasingly felt. For example, in March 2024, some areas in Nairobi, including that in which this research has been conducted, were severely flooded, killing people and forcing residents out of their homes.

Kenya is also experiencing a cost-of-living crisis, caused by price increases of essential goods and a stagnation of wages. This crisis is an outcome of both domestic and global issues, such as the Kenyan drought of 2022 which affected food supplies, and the Russia-Ukraine war which disrupted the supply of essential imports such as wheat and energy (Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis 2023). Low-income households in urban neighbourhoods, who spend most of their incomes on food, have been said to be affected particularly severely, given their vulnerability to food inflation and that the minimum wage has lagged behind the living wage (ibid.).

For the purposes of this chapter we primarily report, in the first part of the chapter, on data concerning the experiences and impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people living in

an informal setting. In the second part, we argue that the pandemic did not necessarily appear, in the narratives of young people, to be of greater significance than other challenges that characterise their everyday life. We discuss participants' accounts of everyday challenges that derive from wider issues such as the above-mentioned cost-of-living crisis and climate change. Our focus in this chapter is on the intersections of being young and living in an informal settlement, with some reflections of gender differences. How are challenges, stressors and crises experienced by young people in an informal settlement and what is their resilience to cope with and respond to them?

It is important to briefly set out the meanings of these three terms – informality, youth and resilience – in the Kenyan context.

Informality

Informal settlements, sometimes also referred to as 'slums', are a prominent feature in Nairobi and in other urban centres across Kenya. Depending on definitions and methodology being applied there are an estimated 100 to 200 informal urban settlements in the Nairobi area, occupying between 1% and 6% of the city area yet housing between 50 to 70% of the population (Elverson and Hoglund 2017, Lines and Makau 2018, Nyadera and Onditi, 2020, Kimani et al 2021) – 4 million people in Nairobi alone, according to UN-Habitat (2019, cited in Nyadera and Onditi, 2020). Despite making up such significant part of the population of Kenya's urban areas, residents of informal settlements have historically been marginalised in the economic, social and health policies of government.

Informality is typically argued to include several dimensions, such as:

- the informal economy, with large proportion of the population working in precarious, casual and low-paid jobs, without contracts or legal protection, or in self-employment in micro businesses (Thieme 2013, Thieme 2018)
- informal housing, where homes are built and occupied without legal tenure or official planning, rendering residents vulnerable to unsafe living conditions and evictions (Manji 2015, Rafieian and Kianfar 2023).
- a lack of basic services, such as sanitation, water, transportation and other essential public services (Davis 2006)
- informal politics, community activism, and resistance (Lines and Makau 2018, King et al 2020, Rasmussen and van Stapele, 2020)
- practices of creativity, adaptability and resourcefulness (Roy 2011, Simone 2018)

- legal, social and policy marginalisation, which is a result both of colonial legacies and contemporary policies and structures (Kimari, Melchiorre, and Rasmussen 2020).

All these dimensions significantly shape the lives and experiences of young people living in informal settlements (Kaarsholm and Frederiksen, 2019). With restricted access to power, finance and forms of social capital, young people are one social group that has been found to be more vulnerable to crises and challenges, since they are less likely to possess sufficient resources (Bolzan and Gales 2018; Vertigans, Mueller-Hirth and Okinda 2021).

Youth

Definitions of 'youth' or 'young people' are context-dependent and vary based on cultural, social, legal, and economic factors. In Kenya, youth are defined to be aged between 18 and 34 years, whereas children are considered to be those under 18 years old (Constitution of Kenya 2010). Like other lower-middle economies, it is a very young country, with 70% of the population below 30 years of age (Kimari, Melchiorre, and Rasmussen 2020). The concept of 'youth bulge' links fast growing youth populations to developmental opportunities, but more often to risks around pressures on infrastructure, education, employment, and to potential threats to security and political stability (Fox et al. 2016, National Council for Population and Development 2018, Kimari, Melchiorre, and Rasmussen 2020). Recent literature goes beyond this dichotomy of "demographic dividend or demographic bomb" by developing the concept of "everyday hustle" to examine the everyday lives of young people in poor urban neighbourhoods in Nairobi and beyond (Thieme 2018, Thieme et al 2021). Across geographies, argues Thieme (2018: 532), youth are a highly 'disaffected and disenfranchised social group' that is simultaneously excluded from normative social and economic structures and 'highly connected to (ICT) networks of solidarity'. The "hustle" refers to ways of making a living that do not fit within formal economic norms, and might involve the daily graft for survival as much as, for some individuals in youth groups, 'navigating eclectic constellations of potential 'sponsors' (NGOs, social enterprises, and local politicians) for forms of support that would benefit the local commons' (ibid.).

Resilience

Resilience too is a contested concept that has become integral within climate change, community development, humanitarianism and international development programmes. In the context of communities, resilience derives from and requires local knowledge, community

networks and relationships, communication, health, governance and leadership, resources, economic investment, preparedness, and mental outlook (Patel et 2017), and is, as the so-called 'social turn in resilience' shows, further shaped by political and power structures, shared identities, cultural practices, belief systems and relationships with places (Bosetti et al 2016). However, as critics have increasingly noted, international discussions on resilience can be leveraged to highlight individual responsibility and decision-making, while downplaying or obscuring the socio-political and structural factors that contribute to vulnerability (Joseph 2013). Shifting the focus on resilience understood in this individualised way can then become the justification for international resources and funding to be withdrawn in order to 'responsibilize   ' local populations (Bargués-Pedreny and Martin de Almagro 2020; Kastner 2020). Such a perspective may 'over-glorify agency and aestheticize vulnerability, poverty, and suffering of the urban poor without necessarily exploring risks and government responsibility' (Banks et al. 2020, cited in Fransen et al. 2024). In previous work on practices and understandings of resilience in informal settlements (Vertigans, Mueller-Hirth and Okinda, 2021), we have been cognisant of such critiques, but have adopted Hajir et al. (2022: 12) argument that 'opposing locally designed interventions that aim to promote their resilience becomes a simplistic act of armchair activism that risks further disempowering vulnerable groups.' In so doing, we both recognise the importance of community contributions to localised resilience and that they are bound within broader structural interdependencies. The groups are loosely tied within these interdependencies which restrict access to physical, political and social networks, thereby constraining the extent to which resilience becomes grounded within, and between, spatialities.

Research context

Our research focused on the poor urban neighbourhood of Korogocho, where research informing this chapter was conducted. "Koch", northeast of Nairobi's city centre, is estimated to cover an area of around 1.5km[2.] Population estimates range from 37,000 to over 150,000, due to the unreliability of data in the context of overcrowding and density (Vertigans, Mueller-Hirth and Okinda 2021). The neighbourhood is bounded by two rivers (Mathare River to the north and Nairobi River to the south) and is in close proximity to the large landfill site of Dandora, providing a source of income for some residents through informal waste collection and recycling, but also causing health and environmental hazards. In order to address the significant socio-economic challenges, as outlined earlier, local community-based organisations have emerged, setting out to alleviate poverty and food insecurity, education,

gender-based violence and (dis)empowerment, to name but a few areas of activity (see for example Muchiri and Opiyo 2022, Liguori et al. 2023). Such local organisations work with and are supported, to varying degrees, by national and international NGOs, local chiefs, the Nairobi City county government, and national governmental agencies.

Alongside higher levels of unemployment, the economy of informal settlements is characterised by informal and micro businesses such as those providing services, waste management, construction and transportation. With limited prospects of employment in the formal economy, youth have been increasingly engaged within the informal sector (Samuel Hall et al 2017). As a result, employment and business opportunities in informal settlements were immediately impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions. The economic consequences of the pandemic have been argued to be more severe for those living in informal settings, due to historical marginalisation in government policies, the high proportion of casual, unskilled and informal employment and the lack of security, savings and assistance. A Population Council (2020) survey of informal settlements in Nairobi – though not including Korogocho – showed that 88% of respondents had lost income due to COVID-19 and many have lost all their income in the second and third quarter of 2020. As Nyadera and Onditi have argued,

> measures being implemented by the government to curb the spread of the disease have disrupted activities in the informal sector where many slum dwellers depend on their daily wages. This has turned the blanket policies, characterized by curfews, partial lockdown, and 'social distancing' that the government of Kenya has adopted, appear to be a cruel joke for slum dwellers as they do not address the main needs for survival of people living in slums (2020: 839).

This chapter proceeds as follows: The next section provides a conceptual framework for understanding responses to multiple crises and chronic challenges. After a brief methodological account, we turn to discussing the qualitative data, first, as it relates to young people's experiences of the pandemic in Korogocho and, second, by analysing how these experiences combined, were amplified and superseded by other challenges such as climate change and Kenya's cost-of-living crisis.

Crises, intersecting precarities and everyday life in informal settings

Recent literature, in a number of disciplines, has questioned the notion of crisis as a temporary rupture or acute, short-term event, recognising that, for many, conflict, violence and suffering are part of the social fabric. The work of Vigh (2008), and subsequently others, on the chronicity of crisis is of particular relevance here (Boletsi et al. 2021). From this perspective, crises are not one-off episodes, but instability becomes a condition (Vigh 2008); coping with uncertainty is normalised (Thieme 2018). Vigh (2008) therefore contests that instead of placing crisis in context, as conventional social science analyses might do, crisis should be understood as context, that is to say as a terrain of action and meaning.

Drawing on this notion of chronic crisis, people's experiences of disease, such as COVID-19, should be seen as part of a whole range of recurrent, protracted, and competing threats to wellbeing (Lynteris 2014, Wilkinson et al. 2021). On this point, it is relevant to note that 45% of African countries had one epidemic annually prior to COVID (Kapata et al. 2020). This suggests that, contrary to dominant understandings of the pandemic as exceptional crisis, epidemics and other experiences of disease are a common and chronic occurrence for many people in the Global South and that they interact with and amplify other harms and everyday challenges. Wilkinson et al (2021) use the notion of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011:2) – defined as a gradual, delayed, out-of-sight violence 'of delayed destruction' and developed with regards to environmental (in)justice – to highlight how the conditions of living in informal contexts contribute to chronic diseases which in turn contribute to lives of chronic precarity and protracted crisis:

> the acute emergency caused by this new pathogen finds deep foundations in the slow, protracted emergencies and violence of everyday life for the urban poor. Worryingly, the pandemic may be worsening the already poor management of chronic disease as health services close or pivot to COVID-19 care (Wilkinson et al 2021: 5150).

In more general terms, when violence is reduced to single events or short, clearly defined periods of conflict or crisis, the health consequences for people living with, suffering, or dying from the long-term, delayed, or accumulative impacts of environmental risks can be easily neglected (Mueller-Hirth 2023).

Similarly grappling with the interactions of acute and chronic temporalities and agencies in responding to the pandemic, MacGregor et al. (2022: 19) have recently proposed the concept of "intersecting precarities", to describe:

the reality of COVID-19 manifesting amidst already precarious lives and a paucity of state welfare, prompting people to take individual and collective action to negotiate the effects of public health restrictions. COVID-related measures, enforced within an acute emergency framework oriented toward averting a health crisis, were instituted in contexts already beset by chronic circumstances of uncertainty and "slow emergencies" (Anderson et al 2019).

These debates draw attention to the chronic nature of severe challenges as well as to their everyday nature and are relevant to the lives of and issues faced by participants in this study.

However, it might be argued that the notion of a chronic crisis is paradoxical given that crisis is by its very definition temporary. As Henig and Knight (2023: 3) have noted, crisis is not really a crisis if it loses it temporariness: 'there must be a point when crisis-as-context ceases to be a crisis at all and instead becomes a fundamental feature of the system, such as the crises of capitalism or the structures of axiomatic violence, usually the reserve of colonialism, race inequalities and hierarchical gender relations.'

It is not within the scope of this chapter to develop alternative concepts. However, we note debates in the literature on youth in poor urban neighbourhoods of the Global South around uncertainty, precarity and the "everyday hustle". As indicated above, the latter has been conceptualised as 'the everyday dealings associated with uncertainty and accepted informalities that pervade realms of everyday life amongst youth in precarious urban geographies' (Thieme 2018: 529) in an attempt to grapple with the links between acute and long-term disasters, crises and stressors (also see Thieme 2013, Van Stapele 2021). The "hustle" can be understood as an expression of the struggles and agency of urban youth in Kenya (and elsewhere in sub–Saharan Africa) and their practices of belonging and their resistance against urban marginality (Thieme et al 2021).

Methodology

This study has adopted an interpretivist methodology, because this approach focuses on social, historical, and cultural contexts in which people live and the meanings and concepts that they themselves produce (Blaikie and Priest 2019). The qualitative data informing this chapter were gathered in four research phases between 2020 and 2024. It was informed by a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, aimed to emphasise equitable engagement of

all partners throughout the research process in order to help overcome the frequent neglect of community members' voices, particularly during times of crises (Minkler and Chang 2014).

Phase 1 (March 2020) was designed to gain an understanding of how environmental activities around the river in Korogocho affected young people. 25 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in Swahili or English, comprising 12 female youth, 10 male youth, two chiefs and one village elder.

Topic guides for the interviews were discussed and decided together with community stakeholders, including activists, CBO representatives from Korogocho and a community leader from a nearby informal settlement engaged in the Koch community, before data collection. Some interviews were undertaken as walking interviews, in order to produce qualitative data on how the participants made sense of their neighbourhood, the changes that it has undergone and how they use the transformed spaces. This initial fieldwork coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 in Kenya.

IIn the second phase, we expanded the scope of the study in order to learn about the effects of the pandemic on the young people in Korogocho and the wider community. Between May 2020 – November 2021, fortnightly short interviews were conducted on a range of emerging   issues related to the pandemic (including impacts of restrictions, income generation, gender dynamics, food security, sense of place and place attachment, community relations, health systems, environmental change, and more). A total of 28 rounds of short interviews were completed, each with 22 community members, of which the vast majority were youth. Demographics for these interviews varied from round to round, partly due to availability and the restrictions placed upon movement during the pandemic. The questions for this phase were created in collaboration with a Koch community leader, through regular joint online conversations, and translated and carried out by two members of a local community-based organisation.

The third and fourth   phases were   face-to-face semi structured interviews in January 2022, and between November 2022 and January 2023. Interviews were led by the authors in Korogocho. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes and was conducted in either Swahili or English. Phase 3 focused on young people's strategies following the pandemic, with 22 youth participants (12 male and 10 female). Based on insights from these interviews regarding the interconnected nature of participants' challenges, Phase 4, with 26 interviewees, was designed to explore everyday life and how young people perceived crises and future prospects.

Alongside a focus on young environmentalists as in previous rounds (5 females and 12 males), young local micro or small business owners (n= 6), teachers and other community members, were included in the sample to gain a more contextual understanding of the challenges.

The data were analysed by the authors using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2019), chosen because it is flexible and interpretative and acknowledges the role of the researchers in shaping analytical themes. Ethical approval was sought and granted for each of the research phases. Safeguarding, data management and data storage procedures were adopted in line with the relevant policies in the authors' institution and those of the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice.

Research phase	Research focus	Data collection method	Number and gender split of participants
1 (March 2020)	place, environmental activism, community relations, change.	Face-to-face semi structured interviews, conducted by the authors	25 participants in total: 22 youth (12 f and 10m) 2 chiefs (m) 1 village elder (f)
2 (May 2020 – November 2021)	Wide range of topics, informed by the pandemic and other challenges	28 rounds of short interviews, conducted by community members	22 youth, but not always the same 22 participants. Gender spit varied but roughly half and half.
3 (January 2022)	Coping strategies, impacts and challenges post-pandemic	Face-to-face semi structured interviews, conducted by the authors	22 youth (12m and 10 m)
4 (November 2022 and January 2023)	Everyday life, crises and thinking about futures	Face-to-face semi structured interviews, conducted by the authors	26 participants in total: 17 young environmentalists (12m and 5f); 6 micro/small business owners in the community (4 f, 2 m); 3 other community members (3f, 1m)

Figure 1: Research phases and participants

Experiences and Consequences of COVID in Korogocho

With the onset of the pandemic, Global South countries such as Kenya were initially considered to be particularly vulnerable, with informal settlements believed to be at the highest risk due to the characteristics of informality outlined above. A 2022 report found that 'that slum dwellers were potentially at a higher risk under the pressures of COVID-19 of deteriorating conditions with regard to the provision of health services, employment, gender-based violence, education and youth-related problems, and human rights violations' (Solymari et al 2022: 1). Research on earlier pandemics has also shown that they have had greater impacts on poor and marginalised people (Wiegratz et al. 2023). The earlier phases of this research similarly evidenced the key impacts of the pandemic on young people in the informal settlement as relating to economic, educational, health, social, and gender issues.

Economic impacts

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants in our research noted that they lost income because of several reasons: no longer being able to travel to places of work, no longer being able to bring goods (such as produce they were growing locally) to market, the temporary closure of some places of employment, and the affordability of sanitizing goods that remaining jobs required. As mostly unskilled and casual workers, they did not have access to furlough programmes and, as young people in an informal setting, they mostly did not have any savings to fall back on to. There was initially very limited government and third sector support for informal settlements, with perceived uneven assistance for specific groups and specific areas subsequently (Vertigans, Mueller-Hirth and Okinda 2021). Participants felt 'isolated as a community' (*passim*).

In the face of these huge economic impacts, many young people in Korogocho showed great adaptability in diversifying their income-generating activities throughout the pandemic. Interviewees told us that they shifted from jobs that could no longer be carried out due to restrictions, to braiding hair at home, sewing masks or selling water door-to-door: 'resources are coming from the personal creativity of a person'. The following is a good illustration of the flexibility of participants:

> I used to work as a local tailor, mostly working on school bags and also school uniforms. But now when the COVID-19 came, I had to shift my thinking. So I started tailoring

face masks which again is really selling during this pandemic. So this has improved and worked well in boosting my income (2.27/3)[1].

However, despite such innovative working, all participants did experience loss of income which impacted on their wellbeing. Other participants reported being able to continue with their jobs but being able to charge less money for the service, for example a woman who braids hair charging KES50 (approximately £0.30) instead of KES400 (roughly £2.35) and even braiding hair on credit.

During follow up interviews in 2022, most respondents indicated that the job market had improved yet incomes were not as high as before the pandemic: 'before Corona came, I used to make around 1500 shillings a day, but now I only make 500 or 700 a day…it has helped us go back to our businesses but the money is not coming in well like it used to' (3/10). Another respondent reflected back to the start of the pandemic and support networks in Korogocho:

> I couldn't find any work. The ones who were helping us are donors like you who came and give us some portion of foods. When they gave me, I will not just hit me alone. I just share with my neighbours some flours. The life goes like that during pandemic. When my neighbour has flour, he just gave it to me and we share (3/15).

This extract indicates the persistence of strong community relationships which helped to mitigate against some of the worst impacts of the pandemic. Indeed, the vegetables that were grown locally through urban farming and that could not be brought to market to sell were used 'to feed the vulnerable in the community' (*passim*).

During fieldwork in 2023, the pandemic no longer explicitly featured in the accounts of participants, but joblessness continued to be the most important challenge they identified, just as it had done during and immediately after covid (3/11). Given the disproportionate effects of the Kenyan cost-of-living crisis on poor urban households, as noted earlier, many participants continue to experience everyday life as 'hand to mouth' (*passim*): 'At the moment, life, what I can say, is just the cost of living. It's really too high for people like us who are not employed. We're self-employed' (4/2). One father of six children (interviewed with a translator whose words are cited here) noted that: 'being jobless […] that he does not have the work really, really

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[1] We adopt the following convention for citing interviewees. The research phase is indicated first, followed by the number of interviewee after the slash. For research phase two, which had 28 distinct rounds, the second number before the slash indicates the number of the round. So in this example, the extract cited was taken from our interview with Participant 3 in the 27th round of the second research phrase.

puts him down considering that he have a family when he goes back home. The children are looking at him like daddy we want food and does not have something to give them' (4/8).

Educational impacts

In response to COVID-19, the Kenyan government closed all schools and colleges nationwide in March 2020, leading to the disruption of over 17 million students across the country until January 2021 (Solymari et al 2022). For poorer families, school closure had significantly worse effects than for better off households. They led to not only a loss of learning opportunities and to educational exclusion, but also to a lack of nutrition for learners relying on schools' feeding programme, as well as to an increase in teenage pregnancies and sexual exploitation (ibid.) There were disadvantages in terms of digital access too, with poorer children unlikely to have their own devices. Moreover, these differences were gendered, in that boys were significantly more likely to access digital material via devices than girls. This may be because of the unequal increase of household chores for girls over boys during the pandemic (ibid..)

In Korogocho, during the 2023 data collection phase, research participants reflected on the various longer-term impacts of school closures on their children or children in the wider community. Parents noted the loss of learning and difficulty of catching up with material: 'kids are not learning the way they used to learn before, because we had one year that kids are not going to school' (3/5). A father of three told us that

> [covid] really affected them because of the syllabus. They have not covered more because in a year they just have three terms and for now they have to read four terms. Even those four times I have to pay. I don't have to just say like that. And even my kids, they have being very affected because they have to go to another class. (3/15).

In Kenya, parents have to meet a number of costs associated with primary and second education that might include additional tuition and examination fees. Public schools in informal settlements tend to be highly under-resourced, with very large class sizes and inadequate facilities. Many of the participants in our study, despite having very little income, chose low-cost private schools for their children. The cost implications of paying school fees, during the financial squeeze of the pandemic are conveyed in the above extract. Unlike the cited respondent, many poorer families were unable to afford school fees given the economic impacts outlined earlier and some children were forced into income-generating activities to support their families. In Korogocho, this typically includes waste picking of recyclable materials in the community or from nearby Dandora dump site, or less often street vending. In

addition to missing school, such income generating activities carry health risks and expose children to exploitation.

It is important to note that the more recent cost-of-living crisis has been reported, by teachers at a local school we interviewed, to have led once again to lead to children not attending school: 'they even drop out of the school. Even they're going to collect plastics so that they can earn a living and put something on the table' (4/25).

Health and social impacts

People living in informality have been marginalised in relation to health policies and the provision of health care (Nyadera and Onditi 2020, Wilkinson et al. 2021). Such heightened vulnerabilities were further increased in terms of the spread of disease, by high population density, people living in close proximity and the lack of running water (Solymari et al. 2022).

COVID-19 resulted in the reduction of incomes for all families we encountered in Korogocho, as already shown above. Given these reduced incomes, households were no longer able to meet their basic needs, requiring them to consume less meals per day and having a less diversified or nutritionally poorer diet (Solymari et al. 2022). We asked the standard set of food security questions used by the UN and other international agencies during interviews in December 2020 and again in June 2021, learning that respondents had often skipped meals, with most only eating one meal a day. Children were occasionally described as 'malnutritious'. However, it was notable that, despite the huge economic impact of the pandemic, participants did not appear to go without food for a day, while other comparable areas experienced this kind of impact. As we outline in greater detail below, this is due to the environmental and food security initiatives of young people, such as the building and maintenance of community gardens and urban farming.

Health and social impacts were gendered, for example in terms of girls' and young women's struggles to afford accessing menstrual products. Some girls and women engaged in 'sex for pads' and the rate of teenage pregnancies also rose during the pandemic, with lockdowns and restrictions hindering girls' ability to seek sex and reproductive health education and accessing contraceptives (Muiruri 2020).

Gender impacts

The pandemic has been acknowledged to have been highly gendered in its impacts (Oldekop et al. 2020, Leach et al. 2021). Earlier sections have already indicated how such gendered

impacts were shown at the local Korogocho level. Solymari et al.'s (2022: 17) research in multiple informal settlements in Kenya reports that there appeared to be

> more pressure on boys to go out and work or look for income, while girls picked up more of the increased domestic burden—reinforcing traditional gender norms. There were small pockets of highly vulnerable adolescents that were forced by the challenges occasioned by COVID-19 to work or engage in transactional sex (receive gifts in return for sex).

Among our participants, women appeared to disproportionately shoulder the burden of the covid measures; they were more likely to lose their job and take on more cooking, cleaning, and childcare:

> The roles have changed, since the covid-19 pandemic hit us as Kenyans. So a woman goes to look for family and the husband stays at home…but when you at home you can't watch that the house is dirty and cleaning is the work of a woman (3/9).

Our respondents reported greater tensions in their homes because of the impacts of the pandemic and some reported fears around their partners harming them: 'there are so many problems that affect…men are so much stressed and when they go back home, they tend to bring that stress to their wives, their wives are being beaten'. Another woman added: 'if a woman earns more than her man, this leads to jealousy in a family and it can lead to GBV' (2.9/12), and 'in private, they depress themselves because of lack of work' (2.9/3).

However, some participants discussed positive changes in employment patterns due to the pandemic, which included mixing in sectors previously only dominated by male workers and diversification:

> You know before corona virus people were working in specialized sectors, men were working in carpentry, in Kinyozi [barber shops]…but now it has shifted, some women are there in carpentry and doing menial work…some men are in the salon, they are also doing salonist job…so there is no longer specialization because job opportunities are not there…people don't have to specialize in their special areas of work (2.8/10)

Compounding "crises" of environmental and climate change

The previous sections have not only examined the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people in Korogocho, but have highlighted some of the subsequent, additional or chronic challenges experienced by participants in this research. In particular, we discussed the significant impact of the current cost-of-living crisis across economy, education, health and gender. A further chronic challenge faced by residents of Korogocho relates to environmental change. When discussing participants' narratives, we refer firstly to pollution and secondly to climate change that is causing changes in weather patterns.

One of the reasons participants cited for developing their environmental initiatives is the pollution they are exposed to in Korogocho. Air pollution is predominantly caused by the burning of waste materials, such as plastics, in the nearly Dandora landfill site. Waste burning is acknowledged to release harmful gases into the environment, experienced by Koch residents as visible smoke and reported respiratory issues. As one interviewee said: 'we are trying to grow trees so that it will trap the polluted air coming from the dump site because there's a ward in hospital for the people who are living in Korogocho who are having issue in respiratory' (4/2). River pollution is another motivator for initial and ongoing community activism, with local youth regularly organising cleaning of the River Nairobi that is heavily polluted by untreated sewage, industrial waste, and garbage.

Turning to the effects of climate change, participants' lives have been impacted by droughts and by flooding. While droughts have been one of the drivers of Kenya's cost of living crisis which disproportionately affects poor urban households, flooding has affected Korogocho residents very directly and immediately. Flooding of the Nairobi River has regularly occurred in the informal settlements; however, the rainy seasons were said to have become longer, more severe and more unpredictable in recent years. As a result, 'whenever it rains and it floods the water goes to these houses and makes it inhabitable, they have to move to other places until later after it is back to normal' (1/20). Conversely, some residents rely on dry and sunny weather to operate businesses (such as washing clothes) which increasingly unpredictable patters make more difficult: 'nowadays is very unpredictable. Once I go to that river and wash and go to put in in the sun, there is no sun. So you find maybe at the end of the day, I don't have money to sustain my kids' (4/11).

In late March and throughout April 2024, Kenya experienced above-average rainfall that resulted in flooding and landslides. At least 270 people died and more than 200,000 people

were displaced (Pamoja Trust 2024). In Nairobi, many of those who were worst affected by the flooding live in informal settlements, due to the access difficulties for emergency responders in congested living conditions especially given unplanned housing, the poor quality of building materials, the contamination of water due to open sewage and greater likelihood of waterborne disease (Medicins Sans Frontières 2024). The Kenyan Government subsequently destroyed many of the properties close to the rivers, including in Korogocho, leaving thousands of people homeless.

Moreover, Korogocho has been affected by several periods of extended and severe "long rains", (that is to say, the March-April-May rainy season) that began earlier than usual, lasted longer and caused unexpected flooding (for example in 202. Koch residents were displaced and lost property and income, and the rains caused an increase in cholera and other diseases. The concept of slow violence was briefly outlined earlier. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon (2011: 2) describes it as:

> a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (Nixon, 2011, 2).

It is, as literature on environmental injustice demonstrates, most often low-income communities or countries that host hazardous sites and bear the greatest environmental risks (see for example Davies 2022). The health, economic and psychological consequences for people living with, suffering, or dying from the long-term, delayed, or accumulative impacts of environmental risks, amplified by wider conditions of precarity, can easily be neglected. We argue that the impacts of a changing climate on vulnerable populations such as the young people in the study can be understood in terms of the repeated harms of slow violence. These harms interconnect with and amplify the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in several ways. Basic living conditions that have already been affected by the pandemic are slowing being further eroded by cyclical flooding. Livelihoods that are already precarious, as we demonstrated above, are further disrupted, thus exacerbating poverty. Just as the pandemic was shown to have significant mental health impacts, the uncertainty and stress around repeated and unpredictable flooding causes a further psychological strain for people marginalised by a lack of access to infrastructure such as flood defences or drainage systems.

What is more, in the case of environmentalists in Korogocho, the consequences of climate change have affected and partly damaged the regeneration activities youth have undertaken,

and that are outlined next. There are arguably compounding emotional and psychological harms in experiencing the destruction of resources built with one's own hands and in response to marginalisation, as well as there are direct economic and food security impacts.

Responding to multiple "crises"

In what follows, we explore some of the main interventions that have been locally designed by young people in Korogocho in order to respond to and mitigate against the challenges and precarities they face.

Community gardens and urban farming

Young people in Korogocho came together under the umbrella of the grassroots organisation Komb Green Solutions in 2017. After reclaiming riparian land from the River Nairobi and restoring the banks, group members have been to plant crops for subsistence as well as generating income by selling surplus produce and seedlings. The group initially installed circular community gardens to grow crops such as kale, onion, cowpea leaf and arrow roots and onions and have subsequently managed to gain funding for polytunnels and vertical farming.

As a result, Komb Green members and their families had some food security to mitigate the income shock caused by the pandemic: 'if I don't have money to buy some vegetables at the Korogocho market, I will go talk to our members and if they agree, I'll just take vegetables from our garden so I can take to my family' (3/6). Similarly, during the current cost-of-living crisis, the gardens provide at least some resources to adapt. Interviews with a wider set of residents demonstrate the wider community benefits of the Komb green initiatives. For example, 'I'm a teacher and most of the time I'm the one who find myself going there. We also get parents and other community members there just going there to get, some buy the vegetables. Others are given depending on their vulnerability. It has really helped the community' (4/25).

The reputation for environmentalism that resulted from these initiatives also provided the group with opportunities for skills development and training (such as in urban farming, professional skills such as carpentry, but also on issues such as gender empowerment and GBV), and their exposure access to networks and connections outside of Korogocho.

The People's Park

The most visible transformation produced by the youth of Komb Green is the construction and maintenance of a landscaped area on the riverbank, referred to by the whole community as "The People's Park". At present, this area is the only resident-initiated green zone along the Nairobi River and the only place in Korogocho with a grass surface. Before the youth's activism, the area was overgrown, full of garbage and, in our participants' words' a 'no-go area'. To be able to restore the banks along the Nairobi River in Korogocho and to eventually build the People's Park, young people worked together to remove industrial waste and untreated sewage that that had piled up for two decades. It took a year to clean the river and construct a gabion and group members did this largely without any protective equipment or additional tools and on a voluntary basis.

The People's Park is used by the community to socialise, relax, play or hold meetings. In many narratives it was portrayed as providing respite from the challenges of everyday life in Korogocho. It has also become a popular destination for visitors from other parts of Nairobi who travel to Korogocho use the space for celebrate special occasions and take photographs. The People's Park thus provides many different benefits: firstly, it offers a space for social interactions, including for community members of different generations to come together. Secondly it provides young people with a sense of belonging and togetherness in the context of huge everyday challenges. As one Komb Green member put it, referring to joblessness during the pandemic, 'I came to know the benefits of being united as a community and the benefits of interacting…even though in lost my job I felt the sense of community.' (3/24). Thirdly, the very visible transformation of the area has also led to changing perceptions of group members by their wider community. While a number of these youths were feared by other residents for their involvement in gangs and crime in the past, they are now regarded by some as community role models: 'seeing something growing and green, it's also very inspirational. They [Komb Green] have changed the mindset of the people' (4/15). Many participants gained a sense of pride from being appreciated in the wider community and especially by their elders. Fourth, there are significant mental health benefits too. Korogocho can be a busy and challenging urban environment. The park is a noticeably calmer space than other areas of Koch, as well as providing fresh air and shade.

But, perhaps most importantly, the construction and maintenance of the park is intended to mitigate against environmental issues such as pollution and heat, as is apparent in the following extract from an interview with Komb Geen members:

> We have been trying to respond to these challenges like adding more gabions to extend the people's park and planting more trees. Because right now we are working with almost 20 youth groups living along the Nairobi River so they can replicate what Komb Green has done. As you can see, if you plant more trees, the weather will change. Even kids around the area will enjoy it because the trees will trap the pollution air. So we are trying to save lives as well for our young generation. (4/14).

What is more, the group has built emergency flood defences along the Nairobi River to mitigate against flooding which, as we have seen earlier, has become increasingly irregular and unpredictable.

Other initiatives

We now give a brief of other initiatives that were designed to respond to challenges and vulnerabilities faced by young people and the wider Koch community.

- A playground has also been installed on the reclaimed land next to the People's Park in Korogocho, which has increased safety and wellbeing for children. Previously there was no place for children to play and there were risks associated with the proximity to the river as well with waste and pollution.
- As noted above, young people associated with the Komb Green group moreover operate training for other environmental groups in Nairobi in order for them to replicate their initiatives around environment conversation
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, Komb Green members began operating a feeding programme for the wider community. The initiative continues to exist with a weekly soup kitchen where produce from the community gardens is used to provide a meal for the community's children.

Conclusion

If, as we have argued throughout this chapter, informal settlements are historically and currently marginalised in policies and structures, young people living in informality are arguably doubly marginalised. Participants often told us that government doesn't think or care

about youths. At the same time, in addition to already precarious lives that require and are shaped around the everyday hustle, acute crises (such as the pandemic or the floods) interact with and are amplified by slower, structural forms of harm and violence. We examined the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people in Korogocho, but sought to also emphasise some of the subsequent, additional or chronic challenges experienced by research participants, focusing particularly on the current cost-of-living crisis and the impacts of climate change such as recent severe flooding.

This chapter has sought to show some of the ways in which young people in one informal settlement have sought to cope with and challenge such interlinking precarities. The transformation of space initiated by Komb Green members through the reclaiming of riparian land that was previously a no-go area represents a response to the experiences of environmental and climate change in their local environment as well as to other chronic stressors. Two notable examples include the planting of bamboo trees to reduce pollution from the nearby mega dumping ground in Dandora and the constructing of gabions after the river cleanup to help control increasingly unpredictable floods. Additionally, the creation of shared spaces, such as the People's Park, has transformed group members' senses of place while urban farming has provided some food security and income. Participants emphasised how these community-driven activities have significantly improved their health and well-being, as well as that of the wider community. This engagement in turn has also improved intergenerational relationships, as the wider community and elders, who once viewed the youth as criminals, now see them as role models. In turn, many Komb Green members consider mentorship and training for the next generation a key responsibility, focusing on resilience, environmental conservation, and more.

Although some efforts to restore the river and improve the wellbeing of people in the informal settlement are underway at the county and national, levels, it is crucial to recognise the essential role and contributions of young people and their resilience in responding to intersecting precarities. Through group membership, shared identifications and collective responsibilities, there are relationships and resources that can enable Komb Green to address acute and everyday challenges. Nevertheless, intersectional precarities experienced within the group and across the community highlights the limits of such localised activism. For instance, gender dynamics, power relations and economic opportunities continue to be shaped, and constrained, by national and international economic, social and cultural processes that inform pervasive levels of precarity. Environmental change such as flooding undermines and sometimes literally destroys resources young people have created for their community. Hence at the same time as

the community group builds localised resilience, the inaction of government in relation to informal settlements on the one hand and recent evictions on the other reinforce the senses of marginality and neglect the young people that shaped our research findings are experiencing.

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