

Daily Monitor goes beyond the stereotypes to explore the multifaceted existence of slum dwellers. We take you on a journey through Kamwokya, Kiyembe, and Kimombasa, some of the city's slums, and delve into the daily struggles of the slum dwellers.

BY JACINTA MARIA KANNYANGE

From the glass-fronted offices and guarded compounds of Kampala's city centre, it takes only minutes to reach some of the city's forgotten communities.

A short walk, a boda ride, sometimes just crossing a road, and the city's promise collapses into a maze of rusted iron sheets, open drains, choking smoke, and cramped rooms where families reside.

These are Kampala's slums, neighbourhoods that exist in the shadow of power and wealth, yet remain cut off from the protections, services, and dignity that the city offers just beyond their borders. Here, life is shaped by battles for clean water, safe shelter, food, and survival. Disease spreads easily, fires are frequent, and insecurity is constant.

In some ghettos, the problems are decades old, yet hope survives. There is a crucial element of resilience, ingenuity, and a thriving human spirit found within these settlements.

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The three-part series goes inside these settlements to tell the stories behind the statistics and the faces. It examines how communities living just a stone's throw from State House meetings, luxury hotels, and policy decisions endure conditions that reflect neglect, inequality, and broken urban planning. It is a reminder that Kampala's prosperity and progress are unevenly shared.

Kiyembe: What it means to grow up in a slum

In the wee hours of the morning, Kiyembe Village is already awake. Music from all-night discos thumps through rusty iron sheets. Half-dressed women shuffle away from corners where they spent the night, while young men lie stretched along a foul-smelling drainage channel. The air carries a blend of sewage, alcohol, and charcoal smoke.

Mothers light small charcoal stoves and boil thin porridge, carefully rationing the little they have so each child gets a sip. Breakfast here is not guaranteed. Deciding who eats and who waits until evening is part of the daily struggle.

As dawn settles, the slum begins to stir. Children step over sleeping bodies and stagnant pools as they prepare for the day. Kiyembe slum, found in Masana zone in Kansanga parish, Makindye Division, is home to 40,000 people squeezed into just 25 hectares. Life is

Kampala City slum residents hold onto hope amid despair



The makeshift shelters in Kiyembe slum in Masana Zone, Makindye Division. PHOTO/MARIA JACINTA KANNYANGE

loud, chaotic, and fragile.

By mid-morning, the surrounding neighbourhood is alive with commerce. The aroma of Ethiopian and Eritrean coffee blends with the sound of frying chapattis in the nearby market. Shops open along the tarmacked Ggaba road, giving the illusion of prosperity. But a few metres down the murrum stretch, reality shifts drastically: electronics stalls, tiny restaurants, salons, bars, and movie libraries line the crowded paths, each squeezed between makeshift homes. This is where many children spend most of their day learning, observing, and absorbing things around them.

Loss of innocence

Among them is Brian, a 13-year-old boy. His family lives in a single room tucked behind a drug-infested alley. He once attended a nearby primary school, scoring Aggregate 13 in the Primary Leaving Examinations. But school fees, uniforms, and lunch money became an obstacle. A year later, he remains out of school. The roadside has become his classroom. Older boys have become his teachers, showing him how to sniff toxic drugs and pickpocket.

His mother, a market vendor and mother of five, has watched him change.

She says: "My son changed a lot; I no longer understand him. He must have picked habits from the neighbourhood and his friends."

Her worries do not end with Brian. She guards her teenage daughters closely, afraid they might slip into the same traps that caught many girls raised beside sex workers and nightly chaos. Her eldest son is already in rehabilitation.

A few steps away, another reality unfolds. A group of girls, not older than 12, wander the slum asking for Shs500 to buy popcorn. One of them carries a

baby strapped to her back. She explains that their stepmother locks them out of the house each dawn as she goes to work in Kajjansi on Entebbe Road, leaving them only a flask of porridge. They roam the slum until evening, waiting for her return. Here, innocence is short-lived.

Children grow up among different tribes, nationalities, behaviours, and influences, many of them destructive. According to local leaders, of every 10 adults in these communities, at least three are involved in theft or crime. In such an environment, picking up dangerous habits is not a possibility; it is almost a guarantee.

In some corners, babies relieve themselves on the floor while chicken hov-

son of Ssebuliba Zone, sees the long-term cost of Kiyembe's struggles. Raising a child here, he says, is more than providing food or shelter; it is carrying the burden of lost innocence, wasted potential, and poverty.

Without community accountability and shared responsibility, he warns, the slum will continue to raise not just children, but future criminals and victims.

Other leaders echo similar concerns. Mr Constantine Bagula from Mponye Zone emphasises poor parenting. Parental involvement has dwindled, he says, adding that when meetings are organised to help address children's issues, parents demand transport refunds or refreshments.

Community observer Vian Kirausi says poverty in the slum is not just economic, it is structural.

"Poverty steals everything: dignity, safety, and a child's future," he says.

He argues that the education system, inherited from colonial structures, was never designed to uplift the poor. Dreams here are expensive and scarce. Some university graduates even return to the slum, defeated by a system that prepared them for disappointment rather than success, he says.

He says government initiatives such as the rent-to-own housing plan once brought hope, but even that has proven unrealistic for many. Mr Kirausi says many of the slum dwellers do not earn even Shs1,000 a day; formal housing remains a distant dream.

In Kiyembe, raising a child means fighting several negative influences: drugs, crime, overcrowding, poverty, broken systems, and disappearing community values. It means watching dreams wither and struggling to keep them alive. Children still hope to become doctors, teachers, or pilots. Parents still pray for better days. Leaders still try to pull their communities back from the edge.

Keeping law and order in chaos

Mr David Twayem, the officer in charge of Kansanga Police Station, says the community used to be good for the locals until urban refugees displaced locals. Urban refugees came with a lot of money and caused inflation. Accommodation became too expensive, and the only option was to move to slums, where accommodation is cheaper. However, this cheap accommodation has also come with a cost; children raised in slums easily become thieves, abuse drugs and are targeted by sex offenders.

"In this parish of Kansanga, we have been fighting against drug abuse, but it has failed. Most of the youth are almost deranged. You find them talking alone," he says.

Mr Twayem says, children raised in slums tend to be unruly and eventually become criminals.

"Parents report cases of indiscipline, school drop-outs. Last month, I recorded two serious crimes. The child wanted to kill his parents, and we found out he was influenced by drugs," he says.

Mr Twayem says they are boosting community policing to fight the vices, with emphasis on curbing drug abuse.

Ms Hellen Nakanwagi, a mother of five, says even though her home is situated close to the slum, her children are safe, and she always assigns them work.

"My children are still safe. One sells water, another one works in the restaurant. The father is so strict. I check on their whereabouts every 20 minutes. They are under strict surveillance," she says.

Some parents' though are too busy to look after their children, says Ms Nakanwagi. She explains that by the time parents come back from work, their children are already tempted.

Some parents in slums will do anything for survival. Some women practice prostitution and accidentally teach their children the vice. Mr Nespul Amudoi, the deputy head teacher of KCCA Kansanga Primary School, says children copying their parents' behaviours are easily identified by some characteristics they exhibit.

"We give learners long uniforms, and they cut them too short. Some children come with alcohol. We only get notifications from fellow learners," he says.

Now the school is designing a child protection book to encourage them to speak about the challenges they go through, but also report issues they encounter at home.

"This very year and term, a child in Primary Six left and got married for one week and later came back. She did it out of ignorance, the child says the mother encouraged her, saying she is already grown up," he says. "We wanted to suspend her, but we thought otherwise. So, we left her; next year, she will be in Primary Seven," he adds.

Mr Amudoi says so far, Girl Up Uganda has signed an MoU to coach girls. The Girl Up Uganda project will start next year.

Kansanga Primary School has more than 1,000 pupils. For its size, leaders feel the sub-county needs two more schools.

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Population: Kiyembe slum, found in Masana zone in Kansanga Parish, Makindye Division, is home to 40,000 people squeezed into just 25 hectares.

er nearby, pecking at waste. Flies swarm freely between rubbish and cooking utensils. Cholera and other diseases are constant threats.

Fighting back

Yet, amid this bleakness, there are pillars of strength, leaders who refuse to give up. Nalongo Kasapatu, often referred to as the "Iron Lady," is an ex-leader at the local council. She dedicated herself to fighting the vices that entangle young lives.

"These children don't need charity, they need a fighting chance, school, safety guidance," she says.

Mr Joseph Kasasira, the LC chairper-