

**COMMUNITIES DEFINING THEIR IDENTITIES OF POVERTY – “WE ARE POOR  
BUT WE ARE NOTSOPPOOR...”**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents findings from the Kenya RECOUP project on *Community Scoping and Household Census*. It provides basic characteristics of wealth indicators of the research communities, households and constituent families thus yielding a reasonably accurate profiles and understandings of the research communities within the four RECOUP research sites located in Nyeri, Nairobi and Kiambu counties. Both conceptually and methodologically, household censuses and community scopings were used to generate not only the patterns of material conditions and livelihood indicators but also the self-definitions of the communities’ individual and communal identities based on gender, educational levels and certification, age, family size, habitation, occupation, and family wealth, among others (see household census tool, Appendix 1). Notably, while the concept of poverty has often been associated with absence from benefits accruing from economic and material goods, it was noteworthy how the research communities re-defined poverty in ways that reflected broader, more socio-culturally reflective conceptions that transcend material well-being. Again, while there tendency to link types and levels of school education with financial/economic benefits for individuals and communities exists; the community study revealed that this may not be so in their contexts and lived realities. There was a notable contrast in the way the research communities conceptualised extreme poverty in the context of what emerged as their conceptions of human well-being. However, because education has come to be associated with the eradication of poverty and the enhancement of human well-being – the co-existence of well-being and material poverty becomes difficult to distinguish for many people. This paper pursues constructions of communities’ self-identities based on articulations that bear cultural insights. The often uni-dimensional concept of poverty as deprivation of material well-being emerges in this study as limiting in both scope and meaning as it tends to lose sight of social and cultural values of good life that are not definable in economic or material terms.

**Key words:** human well-being, poverty, communities’ self-identification

## INTRODUCTION

### Exploring the Concept of Poverty

Over the years, the World Bank has provided a relatively comprehensive definition of poverty in non-monetary terms that include a combination of the presence of hunger, **lack of** shelter, being unwell or sick and lacking access to the services of a doctor. Importantly, it also foregrounds access to schooling and the expected outcomes of enhancing literacy (ability to read and write) as key to eradicating this form of poverty (see World Bank, 2009). In addition, **not having** jobs, worrying or fearing about the uncertainty of the future when families live one day at a time has also been linked to presence of poverty. In a more qualitative sense, outcomes of material and financial poverty that may result in the grief of the **loss of** a child due to illness that could be prevented through the provision of clean compounds entails the concept of poverty as does the state of powerlessness, lack of representation in decisions that affect people's lives and deprivations of freedoms that would help in challenging inequalities.

This multi-dimensional conception of poverty makes the definition of poverty quite complex due to the implied context specific nature. Notably, Narayan, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher and Koch-Schulte (2000) as well as Misturelli and Heffernan (2008) construct poverty is a complex phenomenon that includes a widespread scope that covers from personal experience (see Shostak, 1965), to economic issues that entail individual (psychological), and communal (social, economic, and political) levels..

However, the most popularly referred to definition of poverty –known even among the poor – is related to an income-based approach which –in its limitations of scope - states that poverty is the lack of income or financial resources to satisfy the individuals' basic needs and/or to achieve a minimum standard of living (Sharp, Register and Grimes, 2003: 167; Singer, 2006; Misturelli and Heffernan, 2008). Before the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Misturelli and Heffernan (2008) conducted an analysis of 159 definitions of poverty derived from over 500 documents, from which they yielded 7 categories of definitions of poverty by scholars, NGOs, governments and donors. Among these, the material, physical and economic factors are predominant in the analysis of poverty compared with the less obvious social and life (human) related definitions. The following table 1 captures the themes within which Misturelli and Heffernan (2008) categorized definitions of poverty. These categorisations and the related details become important in the analysis of qualitative data from this community study.

**Table 1: Thematic categorization of poverty definitions**

<b>1. Economic factors: poverty lines, low income, unemployment (most often referred)</b>
<b>2. Material factors: housing, clothing, standard of living.</b>
<b>3. Physical factors: food, water, health, physical survival.</b>
<b>4. Political factors: rights, lack of political participation (community-level), no voice (individual-level), references to the wider international setting.</b>
<b>5. Social factors: lack of social esteem, lack of social life, inability to participate in community life.</b>
<b>6. Institutional factors: lack of access to services and institutions such as Education and health services.</b>
<b>7. Psychological factors: feelings and beliefs associated with poverty.</b>
<i>Adapted from Misturelli and Heffernan (2008)</i>

## Measuring Poverty in Communities:

For many people, the process of measuring rates of poverty, within national or international standards, is a complex technical matter. In many countries, mainly in the less developed ones, the consumption rates (the minimum expenditures made by poor people to subsist) are the preferred welfare indicators –yet many of these communities do not have access to the bare minimum means of survival upon which to measure their consumption levels. This is in contrast with most developed countries that define their poverty thresholds based on individual or family income equality (or inequality). Following the monetary base of personal incomes or expenditures, the World Bank back in 1990 defined a common standard: the **international poverty line**. Poverty lines are calculated on the basis of several methods and surveys sources that allow for reflection of a social perception of ‘relative deprivation’ which rises alongside income (see Ravillion, Chen and Sangraula, 2008; World Bank, 2008b). In 2008, the international poverty line was recalculated at \$1.25 a day. However, there are other aggregate indexes such as the Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>1</sup> calculated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which focuses mainly on health, education as well as the estimates of purchasing power parities (PPP).

In this context, poverty may be defined in various ways that suggest among other things, the presence of conditions of scarcity, shortage, deficiency, lack, dearth or paucity. In all these conditions, there is a suggestion of deprivation of something, or indication that a certain need is not fulfilled. Poverty emerges as a negative thing that elicits need for deliberate actions that would help in escaping from it. As the findings of this study will show, poverty in human terms refers to a situation whereby people may not afford the very basic needs that provide minimum levels of dignity in life such as; having enough food for family; occupational privileges that would make a person less dependent on others; physical ability that allows people to earn livelihoods; adequate shelter, access to clean water, education and health, protection from violence, and equally importantly, having a voice to define the direction of what happens in their lives, communities and countries. All these deprivations –in effect- affect peoples’ well-being or quality of how they live

In order to validate the realities of poverty, the researchers and scholars sought to capture voices of the participants living in poverty as one of the most basic and reliable source of generating the closest and most apt meanings of poverty. In this sense, it became possible to access definitions of poverty –not as the lack of means to feed self and family but more so – as they lived experiences of deprivations in the form of hunger, ill-health and wanting shelter as deep-loaded and commonplace realities. Such definitions are deeply phenomenological and may not be easily measured using standardised statistical tools that may not capture the lived condition of lacking shelter, being sick and not being able to see a doctor, not having access to schooling and what it means to not know how to read or write (illiteracy), not having a job, having the fear for the future, and living one day at a time. Such conditions emerged as laden with existential meanings of deprivation –far beyond the concept of “living by one-US\$-a-day”. When the poor people define poverty as losing a child to illness brought about by inability to access clean water, or as powerlessness to influence decisions that affect them, or even lack of quality representation and freedoms to act in their interest, then such definition brings us close to *the very core of poor*

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<sup>1</sup> The HDI helps to measure the different degrees of development between rich and poor countries.

*quality of life*<sup>2</sup> or *ill-being* as contrasted to what may be described as a “good life” or state of well-being (see Narayan, Chambers, Shah, and Petesch (2000)<sup>3</sup>. Arguably, for poor people who experience a multiplicity of these poverty-related deprivations, breaking out becomes a struggle, which may be describe metaphorically as living “bondage” or “slavery”. In order to understand closely the lives of people living in poverty, it was imperative that the multifaceted forms of being poor be located in the context of actual wealth (assets and access to basic commodities) as well as social and public values that are the basis of self-esteem/worth and personal dignity.

In Ghana, using qualitative and participatory research methods as was the case in our study, Norton, Aryeetey, Korboe and Dogbe (1995) observed that within households, assessments of wealth and well-being were mostly personalistic, thus eliciting the gendered dimensions of poverty, which were often overlooked in studies on poverty based on economic wealth measures.

In Kenya, poverty eradication has been a core concern for all post-independent governments. The Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation-ERSWEC- 2003-07 (GoK, 2003), which aimed at providing all Kenyans with what it describes as ‘a better deal’ in their lives, focused on both the individual and national levels of poverty. At a more individual level, the Strategy promised to empower every Kenyan by providing them with a democratic political atmosphere under which **all citizens would be free to work hard** and engage in productive activities to improve their standards of living. Kenyans were urged to rekindle faith in themselves to strive to become a ‘working nation’. For starters, the Strategy underscored the implementation of Free Primary Education and initiation of the Social Health Insurance Scheme as the ‘first step towards economic progress’. In addition, improvement of physical and social infrastructure sectors was also identified as priority areas of social and economic progress. Basically, the Kenyan Strategy seemed to focus more articulately and concretely on economic well-being which according to Narayan (2000) is only one dimension of poverty reduction.

The Kenya Government recognizes that poverty has remained a key concern despite planning and implementation efforts made to address the issue<sup>4</sup>. The National Poverty Eradication Plan 1999-2015 (Republic of Kenya -RoK, 1999) observed that the call for poverty eradication in the country is not only a political necessity but also an economic imperative for Kenya’s development agenda (RoK1999: 8). Accordingly, many families from poor communities have been ‘failing to receive full benefits of the universally available primary school education and rural health facilities because their incomes are incapable of meeting the user’s contributions expected’ (RoK, 1999: 9). This situation only helps to perpetuate poverty in its various dimensions and thus deny communities the chance of acquiring social, educational and economic well-being or what is locally regarded as ‘good life’ and general human well-being.

In order to understand the complexity of poverty, it is imperative to capture the poor people’s narratives and perspectives because it is these that help to reveal what people understand and

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<sup>2</sup> This is this context in which our research on the Social and Human Development Outcomes of Education and Poverty finds meaning with poverty re-merging as having many faces that keep changing from place to place and across time, and which has been described in many ways that our study

<sup>3</sup> Narayan et. al. (2000) identifies ten interlocking dimensions of powerlessness and ill-being that emerged from poor people’s experiences

<sup>4</sup> The launching of the three-pillar Kenya Vision 2030 clearly centralized eradication of poverty as a key government priority. The economic, social and political pillars guiding this Vision’s programme are clearly designed to complement the successful implementation of the Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation (ERS) which propped the country’s economy back on the path to rapid growth since 2002, when GDP grew at 0.6% rising to 6.1% in 2006.

define as bad quality of life or ‘ill-being’ (see Narayan, et al, 2000), and which often transcend the common definitions of economic and material poverty. Hence, to understand the lives of poor people, we must locate the concept of poverty within broader conceptions of well-being and the good life. Thus, it becomes possible to appreciate that for the poor, what some people may consider as ‘little’, may actually mean ‘a lot’, and consequently, as Narayan (200b: 24) observes, the worse-off people are materially, the more a small improvement would mean to them in real terms. In a nutshell while statistical patterns are key to providing patterns of poverty situations, voice-driven analysis of poor people’s lives helps to concretise the real experience of being poor which have been summarised simply, as **pain**:

Poor people suffer physical pain that comes with too little food and long hours of work; emotional pain stemming from the daily humiliations of dependency and lack of power; and the moral pain from being forced to make choices –such as whether to use limited funds to feed their children (Narayan, 2000b: 3)

It is within this understanding of the complexities that characterize the phenomenon of poverty that the Community Study of the Kenyan RECOUP Project was designed –to implement a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies with specific techniques pertinent to the research questions that sought to establish how education interacts with poverty among communities that are defined formally as “the poor”. The key objective here is to derive definitions of poverty from the experts who lived in the reality of experience of being “poor”.

### **Research Methodology and Design**

According to Narayan, Chambers, Shah, and Petesch (2000:2), the world comprises of approximately 3 billion poverty experts –who are the poor themselves, yet the development of discourse about poverty has been dominated by the perspectives and expertise of those who are not poor – namely the professionals, researchers, politicians and agency officials. By locating the poor people at the core of the research process -as actors and equal experts in generating knowledge - researchers can help begin to reverse this power-based trend. The RECOUP research design took into account this challenge in organising research activities that incorporated the research communities as actors and subjects –not objects.

The Community Study was designed within quantitative-qualitative paradigm that allowed the use of both numerical measures as well as textual insights. These included a household census using a questionnaire as well as qualitative methods of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. Eight FGDs were conducted in the context of community scoping (2 with fathers, 2 with mothers, 2 with single-sex gatekeepers, two with female youth and 2 with male youth). In addition, 16 in-depth interviews were also conducted with subjects being drawn from the FGD participants. Sampling of the study sites was based on the then existing Population Household Census (PHC, 1999) categorised the study sites among the poorest in their districts (currently counties). There were four research sites – two in Nyeri, one in Kiambu and the other in Nairobi. In Nyeri, the research community was located in 5 villages of Nyaribo in Kiganjo Location while the other one was in the urban non-formal settlement of Kiawara in Mukaro Location. The Nairobi research community was located in one of the villages in the informal urban settlement of Kibera Location, namely Kichinjio while the fourth site was located the village of Nderu in Ndeiya, Limuru. For the household census the research engaged all for of the research sites, while the community scoping included two sites namely the Nyeri rural site of Nyaribo and the urban site in Kibera. The household census provided patterns of material well-being as well as insights into household consumptions and self-definitions of poverty. The

community scoping helped to expound, through voice, some of the patterns and insights of poverty conceptualisations emerging from the household census.

## COMMUNITY SCOPING AND HOUSEHOLD CENSUS: HOMES AND FAMILIES

In conducting the household census and community scoping, the researchers relied on adult members of households who were present in the homes during the census. The respondents helped to complete the household questionnaire by providing information regarding family membership, identifying the household head, spouse(s), children and any others who shared in budgetary considerations of the specific household<sup>5</sup>.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCH COMMUNITIES

### Respondents/participants

During the census, majority of the study site respondents were female. Table 1 shows the respondents by gender during the census. From the table, most of the respondents were female meaning that in most cases female are left behind either to attend to domestic chores or as housewives. The table shows that female respondents were dominantly present in the homes with Nyaribo having over two-thirds females (71%), Ndeiya had slightly more than half (52%), and Witemere with 51%. Notably, Kibera less than half 47% were female, which may confirmed the perception of prevalence of male urban migration associated with the search for employment or possibly, that men were more available during the census.

*Table 1: Respondents' Gender by Research Sites*

Site	Gender	%
Nyaribo	Female	71.1
Kibera	Female	47.2
Ndeiya	Female	52.4
Witemere	Female	50.8

### Highest Level of Education

The census revealed that most of the residents had attained primary as their highest level of education. However Kibera had the lowest number, with just about 23% of respondents having attained primary schooling as their highest education level, implying that most of the Kibera respondents lacked formal education or had not completed the primary cycle. Three quarters of Nyaribo respondents had completed primary education<sup>6</sup> which was highest in all the four communities. Overall the level of schooling was relatively low in all the research sites as noted in Table 2.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of household was explained to the research communities as comprising the persons who not only feed but also depend on a shared budget at any one time... the idea of 'eating from one pot' was used to clarify the concept

<sup>6</sup> Qualitative interviews and FGDs revealed that most of the Nyaribo residents did not have access to secondary education and that completing school was often equated to completing the primary level

*Table 2: Highest Level of Education by the Different Research Sites*

Site	Ed level	%
Nyaribo	Primary	65.8
Ndeiya	Primary	52.6
Witemere	Primary	29.9
Kibera	primary	24.9

### **Marital Status**

In rural Nyaribo, most of the residents (two thirds) were married. However in all the other three sites most of the respondents were single because they had either divorced, windowed or had never been married as demonstrated in Table 3 below.

*Table 3: Marital Status in the Four Research Sites*

Site	N	%
Nyaribo	Married	66.2
Ndeiya	Not married	63.9
Kibera	Not married	60.2
Witemere	Not married	58.0

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF DWELLINGS**

### **Type of House Walls**

In order to get an understanding of the profile of the households it was important to know the status of the houses in which the respondents and their families lived. The census revealed that majority of residents lived in what is often described as temporary dwelling. Notably, almost all houses (over 95%) in Witemere were timber-walled which locally are categorised as semi-permanent. Following closely was in Nyaribo whereby, three quarters of the houses were also timber-walled. In Ndeiya, 61% of the houses had their wall build of iron sheets (semi-permanent) while in Kibera majority of the houses had their wall made out of earth which and categorised as temporary structures. Table 4 below presents the different profiles by site.

Table 4: Type of House Walls by the Research Site

Site	Materials	N	%
Witemere	Timber	197	95.2
Nyaribo	Timber	170	75.2
Ndeiya	Iron Sheets	112	61.2
Kibera	Earth	150	53.0

### House Floors

In Witemere, majority of the house floors (94%) were earthen while closely followed by Kibera with just over 64% of the houses having earthen floors. In Nyaribo just over half of the floors were made of earth as were 57% of houses in Ndeiya. The remaining houses had concrete floors. Kibera emerged as the settlement with least number of concrete floored houses.

Table 5: House Floor Type by the Research Site

Site	Materials	N	%
Witemere	Earth	190	93.6
Nyaribo	Earth	118	53.4
Kibera	Earth & Concrete	179	64.2
Ndeiya	Earth	112	57.1

### HOUSE OWNERSHIP AND LIVELIHOODS

The census sought to establish the ownership of the houses in which the respondents were living as a measure of economic wealth. In two of the sites namely, Ndeiya and Witemere, over three quarters of the respondents lived in their own houses compared to Kibera whereby, majority of respondents lived in rental houses. In Nyaribu, just about half of the respondents lived in their own houses. Table7 gives a summary of houses ownership of as reported.

Table 7: Ownership of the House

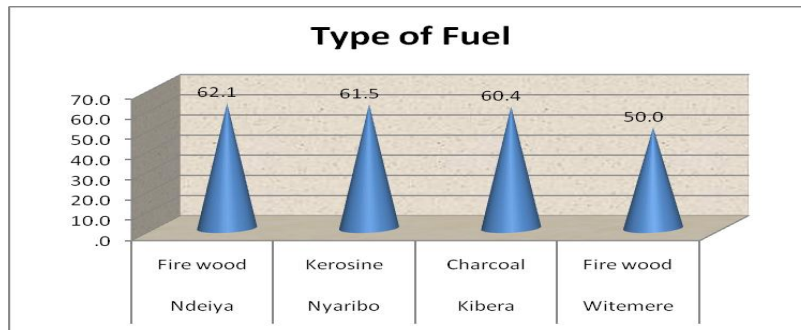
Site	Ownership	N	%
Kibera	Rented	250	92.3
Ndeiya	Own house	142	76.8
Witemere	Own house	149	75.3
Nyaribo	Own house	107	48.6

Figure 1: Mode of Transport

**Type of Fuel Commonly Used**

Figure 2 below gives a summary of the most common type of fuel used with firewood being prevalent in households of Kibera and Ndeiya (over 60%) as well as in half of the Witemere houses. The majority of Nyaribo households (62%) used kerosene which is relatively more expensive

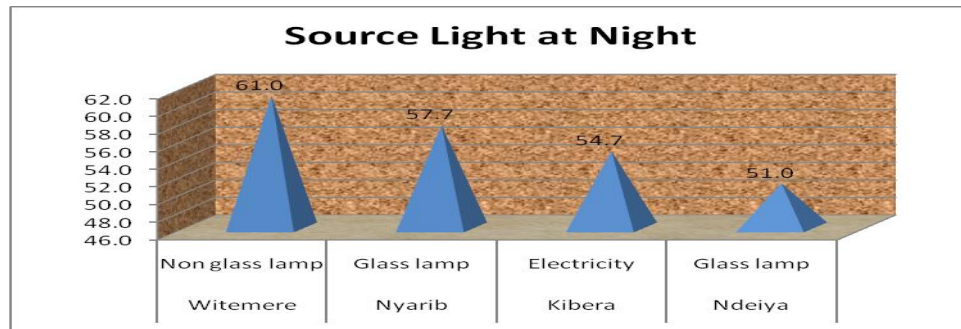
Figure 2: Type of Fuel Used



**Source of Household Lighting**

Glass kerosene lamp (lantern) was used to light up houses at night mainly in Nyaribo (58%) and Ndeiya (51%). In Witemere, over 60 % used non-glass kerosene lamp commonly known as *koroboi*, while in Kibera the most common source of light is electricity in 55% of households. Reportedly in Kibera, where majority of families lived in temporary dwelling, most of the electricity connections were illegally done and hence, posed the risk of fire and electrocutions.

Figure 3: Source of House Lighting



**Source of Clean Water**

In three of the participating sites, access to clean water was presented as core in securing quality of life particularly with regard to health and personal hygienic practices. As indicated in Table 8 below, the most common source of water for majority of respondents in Kibera was the water tank. Here water was stored from the direct taps or addition to harvesting rain water. In the other sites of Witemere and Nyaribo, neighbouring river and stream respectively served as main sources of household water.

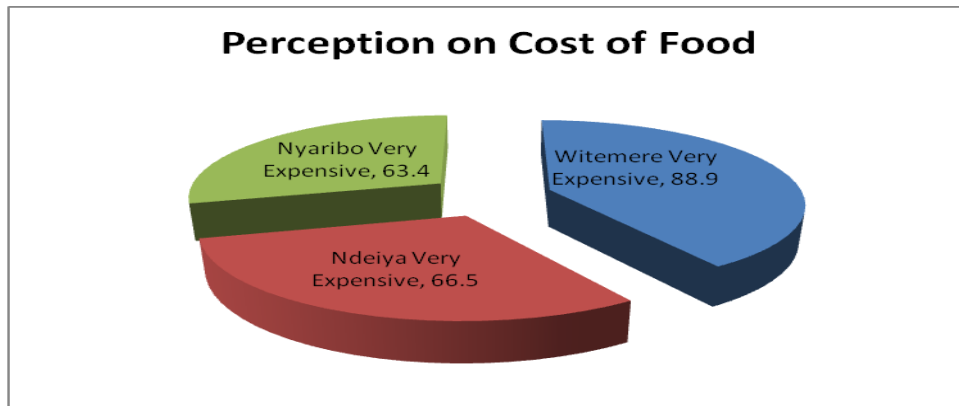
Table 8: Source of Household Water

Site	Source	N	%
Kibera	Water tank	276	97.5
Witemere	River/stream	187	89.9
Nyaribo	River/stream	194	86.2

### Cost of Food

In three participating sites the cost of food for more than two thirds of the households was presented as “very” expensive as shown in Figure 4 below. In Witemere, nearly 90% of the respondents considered food as very expensive.

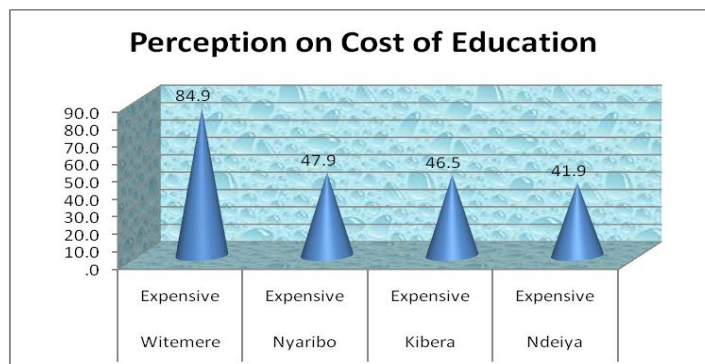
Figure 4: Perception on Cost of Food



### Cost of Education

Even as tuition fee for primary and secondary is “free”, 85% of respondents from Witemere considered Education as “expensive”, though not “very expensive”. This was almost twice the proportion of respondents in the other three sites who considered education to be very expensive as reflected in Figure 5 below.

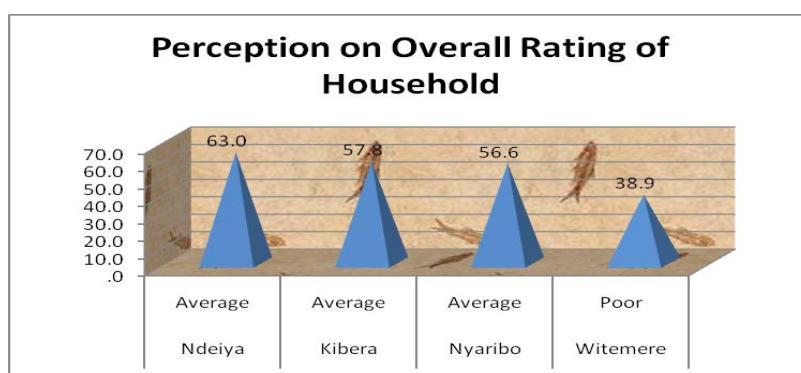
Figure 5: Cost of Education



## Overall Rating of the Household Statuses

Households in the four research sites that are nationally categorised as being “pockets of poverty” in the Kenya Household Demographic survey, it was evident that the majority of the respondents lived in what may be rightly described as ‘abject poverty’. This notwithstanding, however, many of the household respondents did not consider themselves as being very poor, contrary to the assumptions of the researchers or the indications from the demographic survey. Figure 6 below shows the overall perception of family poverty among the households respondents. As respondents from Nyaribo, Kibera and Ndeiya categorized themselves as living average life or relatively wealthy, one in three of the Witemere residents considered themselves as being poor though “not very poor”.

Figure 6: Overall Rating of the Household Poverty by Respondents



## COMMUNITY VOICES CONTEXTUALISING DEFINITIONS OF POVERTY

### Defining Poverty

In their discussions of family well-being, participants consistently juxtaposed material poverty with having a “good life” which they all coveted through their expressions. In the group discussions with community youth, female and male, as well as with parents, community elders and gatekeepers, the conditions of material poverty as well as the non-material situations were captured through communally prominent phrases that focused on what constituted having a comfortable life. Basically, discussions addressed activities that would result in “having a better life” that was distinguished from a life of poverty and deprivation. In this section, we address five pertinent issues that are summarised below as the communities’ indicators of poverty *vis-à-vis* the good life that was manifested in their well-being.

- **The non-material** – these emerged as the communities’ freedoms, capabilities (abilities to perform); the presence of *peaceful* life; experiences of *dignity* and *inclusion* in communities’ activities; the *rights* to belong and be *respected*; having friends/companions and being able to associate, be loved and having access to health facilities and leading a healthy life free from disease and want.
- **Self reliance** – in the context of having jobs/employment –for self and family members
- **Material assets** – concretised in terms of access to finances and the things that money can buy such as basic needs (housing, food, clothing, education)

- **Healthy environment** – including physical surroundings that offer sanitation, security and safety at family and community levels
- **Success** – identifiable outcomes from investments in formal education (schooling)

### **Talking about human well-being and the ‘good life’**

#### *Freedoms*

To have a better life for many of the participants meant the ability to act in ways that helped to minimize the suffering of family members and eradicate material deprivation that affects well-being. In this context both the youth and the adult communities considered being non-poor as not necessary translating into having money or other material assets but rather, the ability to do things or engage in activities that made them feel less deprived. In most cases, freedom as a theme within the framework of well-being and good life tended to dominate the focus discussions in urban settings of Kibera more than in the other sites. The following excerpt from a young male from Kibera exemplifies how youth exemplified the multidimensional experience having good life even in situations of material poverty.

(To be poor means not having good life ... but) Good life does not mean that you have money alone. Good life means many things. It requires that you live freely. If you need to do something, you should not be so oppressed. You should go and do it. Even when you travel from this place to another, you should be able to do so without being bothered. If you have the money and you plan to buy a farm, then you go ahead and plan. If you are expected to construct something, here in Nairobi, then you do so. No one should bother you. That is what I see as good life. Now if you have money then, you have no other way... of spending it freely and that becomes a problem (young male, Kibera, Nairobi).

The above views notwithstanding, good life was also perceived as absence of worries (thoughts that disturb). Hence, by extension, it was argued in the community discussions that the freedom to from lack of housing, land, and means of survival was important in eradicating ‘thoughts that disturb’ and hamper emotional stability and the possibilities of experiencing good life as captured in the interview with parents as exemplified below.

Every person needs to live a good life. Good life is living without thoughts that disturb you; let’s say you have your small farm even if it is quarter acre. You have your house, children, feel you have freedom of anything, you have chicken there, you have your cow – that I call good life. Living in a town, renting a house is not a good life (male parent, Kibera, Nairobi).

The young women from Kibera explicitly articulated their ideas of freedom as a basis of good life and a means of escaping poverty. To them education was the key to various freedoms arguing that education helped people to pursue better lives. The following interview extracts capture this view.

**G:** Good life, I mean, this gets you out of poverty. It is that situation where a person is not harassing you, you are in control... you can control yourself, express with necessary freedom without (fear of) dictatorship. You have the freedom, at least to travel and go any place any time as you wish. If you wish to attend school, to the library...

**Interviewer:** Okay, what is that good life

**G:** To be free... not forced to do anything.

**Interviewer** You may be free (however) but have you got the money in your pocket.

**G:** It is **not a must** that you have money in order to have a certain kind of good life. (She Laughs).

**Interviewer:** Okay, what does a person need in order to attain a good life of being non-poor?

**G:** Education is what is, the most important thing. Because there is no way you can be free without education that shall let you distinguish leisure time, which you can spend this way or that way. Now, that kind of freedom based on education cannot lead you to bad things such as going to take alcohol without knowing the consequences (Young female, Kibera, Nairobi).

#### *Inclusion- being with others, having peace, and being loved*

According to the participating youth, freedom that enhanced good life was not possible to attain in a social environment that was characterised by violence, hostility, and instability but rather in contexts of love for one another. Both female and male youth argued that peace at both the family and community levels was a necessary condition for the exercise of freedoms that allowed individuals and groups to engage in activities that enhanced the good life. According to one young woman, good life necessarily was characterised by peaceful living that supports education.

**M.O:** (..) When you have peace in your community, or within the society you are living...that is what I think is having a good life. I think those are the things I can say are offering a different life.... (But) I need education. Actually, I think (education) is the key, to have a better life. Apart from education, I need peace, because without peace, there is no way, am going to get that education. Because- because you can find in a society where there is war, they don't have that peace. So, there is poverty and no way they are going to have a better life. (...). There has to be peace. And second to peace, there is love among you... between you and society (M.O. Young female, Kibera).

#### *Self-reliance*

There were expressed concerns among the adults in the community regarding the kind of dependency that they witnessed among the youth and which, they perceived to be the source of continued material and social poverty. Young adults seemed to lack clear exit points from home into the world of work and hence resisted the leaving their parents' homes to become independent. The parents discussed the absence of self-reliance among youth as a characteristic of increased poverty. According to one of the parents from rural Nyaribo in Nyeri, it was impossible to conceptualise good life in a situation whereby the young generation was idling in the neighbourhoods and often living off their poor parents because of lack of jobs. This, according to many of the parents, constituted the essence of poverty. One of the fathers (male parent) expressed a feeling of **pain in defeat, hopelessness and resignation** as he expressed his inability to helping his children break away from the cycle of poverty that defined his family.

In terms of business, now here... what kind of business would one do and the kind of business around here needs one to have money. How can you start a business if you do not have money? You must have capital ... people can perform but getting capital is the problem. So for a child needs to be independent, (but) someone like myself must be supported financially so I can give him (a means) to begin a business –money is the means but **poverty is the pain I feel**. Without this, my son stays idle and I do the same (Male parent, Nyaribo, Nyeri).

*Poverty – feelings of being deprived of hopes and dreams*

In comparison with their parents, the youth in the communities provided what emerged as a fresh view of hopes and dreams –visions about their future. They talked of need to be aspired to act in ways that would provide them with better life. Having dreams and aspirations in their view was the only way that helped to make their lives worthwhile – it generated their feeling of self worth even where material want was a persistent experience. According to one young woman (M.O.), a person who has had some level of schooling was in a better position to pursue personal dreams, with hopes of attaining what was perceived as a good life characterised by statuses of non-poverty. In affirmation, another young woman (**R** from Kibera), there was a perceived link between formal education and dreams of good life that was associated with professional careers such as doctors and university professors. It is in these kinds of careers, which the young women “saw” as providing dreams out of poverty. Having the ability to dream and inspire emerged as a way of living a good life characterised by visions beyond the present..

**R.** What I see... a person who is learned (schooled) is focused (with vision). That is, if you sit with them, they are able to tell you their dreams. The person can tell you ‘yes, *I am learned, I have reached this level, but one day, I wish to see myself perhaps as a doctor or as a certain professor*’. But now the one who is not learned, is just there, and depends on what he can gain immediately (no dreams). That is what he spends time on. He does not know how he shall survive tomorrow (R. Young female, Kibera)

Among the parents, this kind of dreaming –or aspiring, could only be quenched through the provision of jobs that provided self-reliance and fulfilment. It was striking that the parents did not seem to identify the potential of the youth in creating self-employment. Instead, many of them seemed to expect some external source of empowerment than that existed outside their communities. According to **P** (a father of one participating youth), it was only education that would enable the youth to acquire employment in order to live a good life away from the village. For many of the participants, having jobs would not only provide a means of livelihood, but was also a source of independence that was consistent with having a good life.

The gendered dimension of poverty and the good life did not escape some of the parents as noted in focus group discussions who singled out the girls as needing more guidance compared to the boys for them learn how to aspire and live a good life. The fact that in the study communities, girls and women occupied the lowly positions with no hopes beyond getting married to more educated men whose highest education some level of primary schooling. The parents underscored the need to expose the girls to role models of women who can inspire them and train them on skills that could help them secure jobs to improve on their lives.

**P:** (There is need to) help girls... and know how these young people live. Then invite people, like (women) groups leaders for girls around here (...). For example, if they can be directed to technical colleges, they be enrolled, they be taught that such skills may get them into jobs. If it is small business, they should be trained on how to do it. Their lives would be improved. If it is schooling, the one who wishes to learn, should learn so as to get jobs. I see that would help them...

In advancing the gender dimension a male parent observed that girls may never have a good life without education that is geared towards getting them into jobs and giving them independence, just like the men. This parent argued that the challenges of attaining a good life for girls and boys were not different and that both genders need the means to a good life.

That is not different for boys. You know these days it is a must for girls to go to school and get good jobs, so that she knows that her life can change. She is even allowed to do business and there is no difference (with men) (Male parent, Nyaribo, Nyeri).

#### *Environments and habitations*

The places in which families and their communities lived provided this study the basic material in exploring the basis of constructions of good life in the communities. The youth participants, in particular were explicitly critical to the question regarding living a good life in the conditions that were visibly characterised by environmental degradation due to lack of sanitary amenities and security as noted in Kibera and persistent droughts that characterised Nyaribo. In contrast to the parents, the young women and young men were vocal in providing graphic examples of how the living conditions deprived the community of a chance to having a good life. They argued that dignified life was the hallmark of good life even when material and economic poverty was part of their daily experiences. The scarcity of water, for instance, was cited unanimously as one of way of denying inhabitants the means to personal hygiene. Further, the absence of sanitary facilities such as toilets, bathrooms and drainages in the community formed a major theme of the subjects' agenda in the Kibera non-formal urban settlement. One of the young women from Kibera expressed scepticism about the possibility of having a better life as a resident of the poor urban community where accessing water and toilet facility remained a major challenge. She wondered aloud saying:

**E:** Okay... being a better life me? I don't see (it) if am living in the slums. If it is the best life; I would like to stay in these developed houses (pointing towards the affluent neighbourhoods)... those that portray development. They are self-contained (and) that they have water, inside there are toilets... those ones (Young female, Kibera).

The fact that the majority of the residents in urban settlement have had to purchase water did not escape the scrutiny of the young women in group discussions as they solicited consensus about the importance of having access to water as part of the commodities that defined conditions of living good life in their community. Suffice it to mention that in addition to difficulties of accessing water, it was the lack of access to finances for purchasing the same water that raised the basic question regarding impacts of poverty. Accordingly, while basic hygiene provided the dignity in a good life, it is the money to purchase the means to that dignity that presented the

greater challenge. In one of the girls in group discussions one participant challenged her peers regarding the centrality of financial empowerment:

**Girl 1:** You know, I am speaking what I know I have. That is, if you do not have money, you cannot have a good life. First, here at the slums, let me tell you... Without money you cannot have good life. Something like water, we have to buy. Now something else you find is that a person may ask you for shillings to buy water. You find that this water, one Jerry-can here, is about 20 litres? You find sometimes like this time, when there is no water, it may cost 10 shillings, 5 bob (shillings). This time, imagine, there is somebody who has... has that 10 bob (...). Now that water will cost 10 bob. That 10 bob cannot be good life to that person. You see. Now I cannot say...I say when money is available, then there can be good life (Young female, Kibera).

This view was a persistent theme among the young men as well who argued in order to have the much needed finances, there was need to work hard, otherwise it would remain a challenge to attain even basic needs such as food, and the secondary education, let alone the clean and sociable environments. To the young men, education was the primary foundation upon which to build a good life in the community.

## CONCLUSIONS

Three major conclusions were derived from findings presented in this paper.

**Firstly**, while observation and household census revealed that the majority of the research subjects live in conditions that portrayed ‘material poverty’, local constructions of self and community, especially among parents, expressed more positive and qualitative definitions of poverty compared with the perceptions of the “outsider” researcher or observer. Thus, the following conclusions followed logically:

- The communities’ constructions of poverty in the concrete material sense was juxtaposed against that of the broader concept of well-being in a manner that transcended the observable material wealth. Poverty was constructed to include mental/emotional states characterised by the presence (or absence) of worries and anxieties regarding environmental health, companionship abilities to earn a living that would translate into having “a good life”.
- The lack of in basic commodities that require financial means was considered more degrading than the lack of the financial base *per se*. Further, even with lack of material goods, ability to live in dignified hygienic conditions was one major way of defining a good life in non-material sense. The idea “**not** living in peace”, “**not** being loved”, “**not** being included in communal activities”, or generally being “unwelcome to, or isolated from social events defined non-material poverty.

**Secondly**, because human well-being and the basis of a good life was identified in the contexts of freedoms from the indignity it is imperative that insights regarding these forms of non-material forms of well-being are made core in any community study that addresses poverty. Importantly, the concept of personal freedoms to partake in the non-monetised engagements in society portrayed great social value among the research subjects at both individual and group levels as revealed in interviews and group discussions..

**Thirdly**, while it is important to employ measures of material well-being in economic terms for purposes of understanding the social and human conditions in a universally defined measure and context, it is equally important to capture the nuances of how communities living in materially impoverished conditions construct their identities taking into account other components of social well-being (social capital) which helps generate meanings around their specific life contexts and what they identify as a life of dignity in their own terms. Hence, the researchers were justified in tapping into the insights emerging from the self-definitions of poverty and well-being in ensuing research projects which focused on issues of youth citizenship, gender and education within the research sites of this community study.

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