

EMERGING FROM VIOLENCE TRAP: A FRAGILE TRANSITION

The IDRC initiative *Understanding and Addressing Youth Experiences with Violence, Exclusion and Injustice in Africa* supports 14 research projects in 12 African countries*. “The project seeks solutions in the form of strategies, technologies, and tools to develop more effective policies for combating the violence, exclusion, and injustice faced by youth, men, and women in Africa.”

Youth crime and violent gangs in Nairobi, Kenya

In Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, violent youth gangs are a major problem especially in slums where they operate. According to UN (2004) over 50 percent of all convicted criminals in Kenya are young males aged between 16 and 25. Nairobi has almost 200 slums, where the 60% of the urban population lives. The Nairobi County is controlled by up to 14 organized criminal gangs, which terrorize residents for ransom (The National Crime Research Centre -NCRC).

Majority of the gangs are involved in armed robbery, drug trafficking, vehicle theft and trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, money laundering, theft of antiques, livestock theft and loan sharking. The NCRC has also shown that business people in the formal and political circles use gangs by unofficially funding them for their own protection or to carry out illegal actions. Youth gangs perpetrate physical criminal violence or physical assault that includes homicide, armed robbery, carjacking, attempted murder, manslaughter and sexual crimes (Gimode, 2001).



Mentorship program in Kambiri Moto
Photo Credits: John Kimani

INTRODUCTION

Consistent research on youth engagement in violence in Africa is currently under development. Some youths manage to exit violent networks, but their respective paths and their related dynamics are poorly documented. It is critical to understand the mechanisms of violence as well as its traps in order to formulate adequate policies aiming to support these youths.

Transition from violent networks to «normal» life can be long, painful and fragile. It is important to have a better understanding of what the main challenges of transition out of violence are, to work on how to support such journeys and what resources to deploy. How can policies contribute to making this path less painful? How can they contribute to building new structures, or strengthening existing ones, that make this transition less fragile and vulnerable to backsliding? What lessons can be learnt from former gang members' narratives, and how to capitalize on their deep knowledge of the gang context?

RESEARCH APPROACH

The *Université de Montréal / RESAUD-Alioune-Badiane* team worked on a case study that emerged during the “Partners’ Workshop” organized in Nairobi in 2019, in collaboration with the IDRC. The individual experience of a young Kenyan citizen - a slum dweller - provides material for a unique case study focussing on his trajectories in and out violent gangs. Mister John Kimani reported his experience of exiting gangs and later on committed to help other youths through mentorship programs. Drawing on his testimony the team conducted 2 interviews and then analysed and verified the results. Mr. Kimani revised, and approved the publication of, this brief.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: VARIABLES THAT FOSTER ENGAGEMENT IN VIOLENCE, AND DISENGAGEMENT

Mr. Kimani was engaged in gangs operating in Kambi Moto, a village inside the Huruma informal settlement of Nairobi where he was born and raised. The case study approach used the model of Chabot et Ouimet (2017) to analyse the relationships between three variables that eventually increased the opportunities for Mr. Kimani to engage in violent gangs. It considers: An unfavorable ecosystem; activators of violence; and low-quality police/justice system.

1 - An unfavorable ecosystem: The 'mentality of daily livelihoods'

Living in a slum is very hard. Poverty traps, unemployment, food insecurity, inequality of access to – and lack of – resources, absent or inadequate infrastructure and services and unsafe spaces, among other challenges, largely limit the youths' opportunities to build upon their future. Youths there are highly marginalized, and their perception of the future compromised. According to Mr. Kimani, "youths have no future in slums". This influences their priorities and choices as their objectives do not include future wellbeing but limit to very short-term achievements.

Structural problems and characteristics of the slum context combined with identity elements and perception of youths make that some of them get caught in a 'mentality of daily livelihoods' where the main objective is earning their living in the easiest way possible. Such mentality ultimately integrates with a milieu of violence. Therefore, the most vulnerable end up investing in a gangster life that eventually pays back with identity and recognition as gang members, power to quickly obtain what they need, and easy money to have food daily and support their families.

Similarly to other slums, in Kambi Moto education can be perceived as a long, unprofitable, and expensive process for those who have few or no means. This perception draws on, or contribute to, perception of no future. Many families live close or under the poverty line- i.e., an average of 1 to 2 dollars per day- so they count on youths to access livelihoods. These families are trapped in poverty cycles since they lack capital that would allow them to initiate business or other income generating activities and step out of poverty. In these cases, youths decide, or are encouraged to, quit school and search for income activities. Poverty traps also generate a certain kind of 'social traps' in which parents and children are caught: Parents lack time to guide youths and to get information on what their children do. Children grow up in an environment of negative mentorship and total lack of adult guidance and reach their teenage years where they already act as adults. Mr. Kimani explains the impact that the lack of planning

typical of slums has on youths. In the village of Kambi Moto, like in many other slum villages, very poor planning manifests in physical degradation and lack of services - predominantly schools. This void is, in his view, one evidence of the lack of future for youths. Slum upgrading including infrastructure and service implementation is therefore critical to pursue the improvement of the youths' living conditions, and consequently their perception of their future.

The slum unfavorable ecosystem results in violence activators and low-quality tandem police/justice system. As a matter of fact, according to Ouimet and Chabot (2017), an ecosystem characterized by poverty and economic inequality negatively affects the quality of formal control systems: weak effectiveness of the justice system, corruption, weak appreciation of the justice services, and absence of application of the rule of law.

2 -Violence activators fostered by the slum unfavorable ecosystem

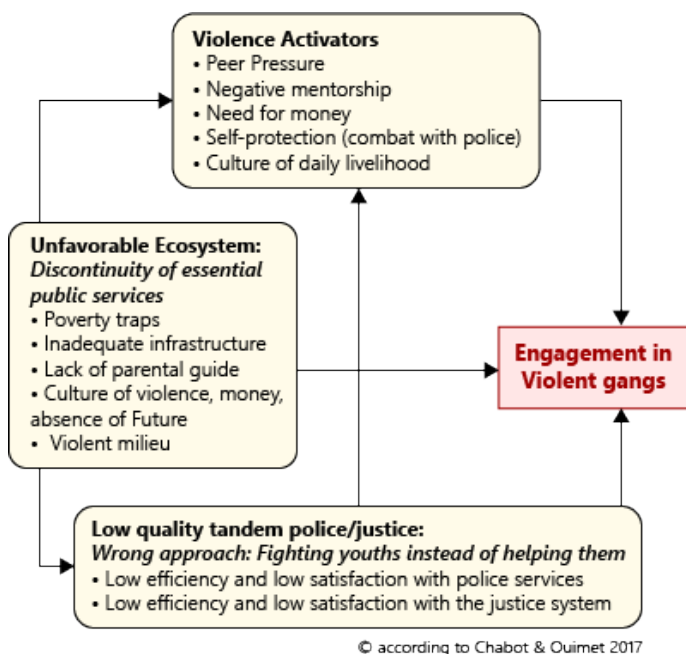
Such a situation creates dependence on easy money and generates what Mr. Kimani defines as a 'mentality, or culture, of the daily livelihood'. In Kambi Moto, he identified at least four factors that can be considered activators of violence. These include: Peer pressure, negative mentorship, need for money to survive, and self-protection against the police. Peer pressure refers to same, or similar, age groups exercising pressure over one's lifestyle. For example, this concerns the way of dressing, having a car, having the latest cellphone, being surrounded by many women, using and trafficking drugs, handling important amounts of money and carrying on a luxurious life. All indicators of achieved power.

But forms of negative mentorship also largely affect vulnerable youths. Mr. Kimani mentions the influence of media and fellow youths, in this sense. Violence also emerges in youth gangs as a form of protection against the police, especially during armed robberies. Youths must fight to survive during robberies; most of them die.

3 - Wrong approaches by the police and judicial system exacerbate violence

In slums, the police and justice systems fight the youths rather than work to help them. Such an approach provokes a sense of abandonment and increases the youths' dissatisfaction with the system. Therefore, the existing distances between youths and institutions tend to increase in a circle that exacerbates violence and youth engagement in violent gangs and inadequate police interventions, and so on. Low-quality tandem police/justice contributes to violence activators. According to Mr. Kimani, the police and judicial system should change their approach and learn to listen to the youths.

Figure 2 represents the three variables in Kambi Moto, through the mentioned model.



CRIMINAL CARRIER: THE FATAL SHORTCUT

Mr. Kimani narrated his trajectories in and out violent gangs and explained how such trajectories usually work for youths in Nairobi. Engagement in violent gangs happens gradually, as figure 3 shows: 1) Youths start by participating in small actions such as small robbery for daily survival; then 2) situation escalates: engaged youths learn techniques and are trained to acquire skills. These include understanding criminal jargon, dressing in specific ways to get recognition as gang members, and learning to use arms to conduct more important and dangerous “missions”. They must train to succeed and self-protect from police; 3) as they get more involved in criminal organizations, when they don’t die, they assume higher responsibilities and undertake a proper “professional carrier” which entails investments in illegal activities.

The objective is *“Not only to survive, but just to have a beautiful way of living, remember I told you we like to do a shortcut, I wanted to go for studies so that I can become a better person in life and maybe probably build my future but I want to live the same life that a person was built his future and make it a life, I want to live the same same standard of living so what I can do is just to terrorize (people) and do all sort of activities to make sure that I have money to change my living standard”*.

“Once you start depending on more consistent missions including drugs, money and armed attacks, you cannot stop” (John Kimani).

Armed conflicts with police often drastically affect the youth lives to disability or death. This is how Mr. Kimani lost most fellow members and decided to change his life.

Gang life is being in the line of duty. It includes meetings, exchange of information and experiences, but also ceremonies and burials:

“...I think sometimes is probably a negative mentality that we all die once... it doesn’t depend on how, on the cause of your death...so you don’t see any big thing, and you say it is a matter of...you normally call it a job, and you say you are dying in the line of duty, so if you die in the line of duty then the members of your gang come and attend your burying ceremony and we say that we have lost a fellow soldier ...” (John Kimani).

TRANSITION: A LONG, PAINFUL AND FRAGILE PROCESS

For Mr. Kimani the tilting point for transition was reached through sense of loneliness and isolation, after about 5 years of engagement. His fellow members had lost their lives and he felt disconnected from the normal people of his community who he could not share any of his activities with. This transition took two long years and posed some important challenges:

- 1) Being accepted back by the family and community. This required huge efforts and commitment in changing behaviour and acting to benefit the community. Initially, Mr. Kimani says, the biggest challenge was to reconstruct links with his family. They felt dishonored by his criminal activities. One among the first obstacles met in the process of rebuilding the broken relationships with his family was to overcome the incapacity of talking. This can be a pattern in the transition process of ex-gang members.
- 2) Facing economic challenges. Lack of easy money is hard to endure when one lacks food. As an example, Mr. Kimani explains that he had to change dietary habits while lacking food during transition. Giving up with the criminal carrier he had to re-adapt to the type of food he could afford.
- 3) Risk of backsliding: Lack of money is a strong pressure to go back to work for gangs. Keeping the decision of exiting requires strength, adaptive capacities, creativity in finding ways to earn one’s living, and support from the community.

“ And now you are coming out from an environment where you could get anything, probably money anytime, drug anytime, if you want women anytime you can do so, and then to convert now to a normal life whereby you have to work hard so that you can put a meal on the table” (John Kimani).

Mr. Kimani managed to get engaged in community initiatives. He volunteered in the construction site for the Kambi Moto slum upgrading project. This is a successful

community-led initiative anchored on the implementation of low-cost housing. This project where he worked as unskilled labour helped him face the transition. His initial volunteer work was followed by gradual payment and support by the community members, and a Kenyan NGOs involved in the housing project that also assists the youth. Some staff of the NGO also mentored him. Eventually, he became a member of the community even though he doesn't live in the new housing implemented through the project.

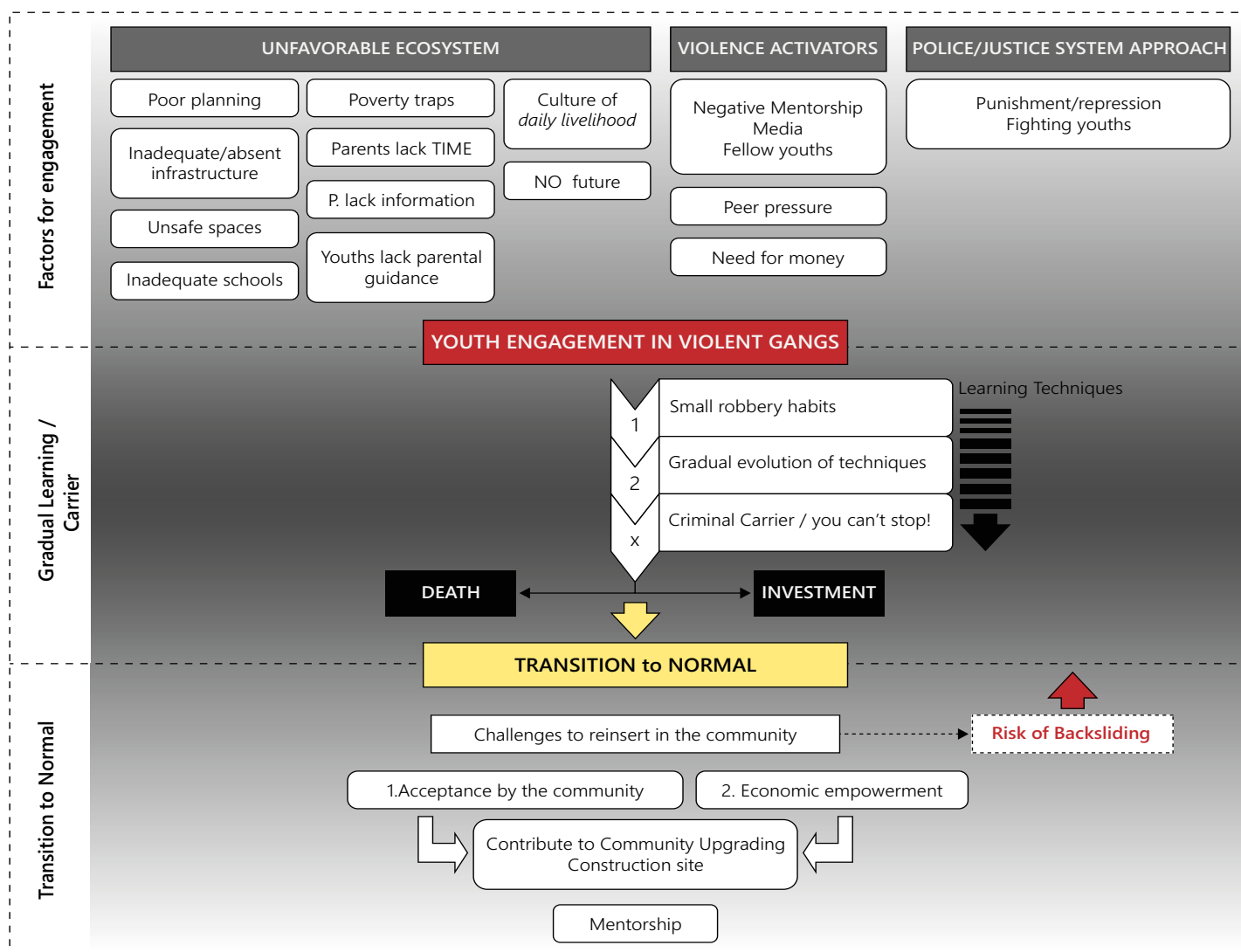
FROM GANG MEMBER TO MENTOR: STRATEGIES TO DRIVE THE CHANGE

Mr. Kimani has been working on a mentorship program for youths for 15 years. Being an expert of the gang context, his knowledge on gangs' language, dressing and behavior codes, have allowed him to keep contact with gangs. His explanation brought to light some key-strategies:

- a. Keeping constant contact with young gang members is critical, their language and habits change very fast. If you don't keep this contact, you lose them!
- b. Becoming a mentor requires having the confidence of young gang members. Mentors must be careful and not collude with the police.
- c. Having a role. Mr. Kimani had to find his new role. He acts as a senior who knows the gang lifestyle. He discusses with gang members, without forcing them to do anything.

This knowledge makes him also eligible for negotiation with government agencies working on security, environment, and youth empowerment. He founded the organization *Kambi Moto Youths and Kids* and works as an intermediary between the control system and the gangs. He basically listens to youths, has discussions with them, has discussions with the police, facilitates meetings and negotiations.

TRAJECTORIES IN AND OUT OF VIOLENT GANGS



HOW TO COUNTER RISK OF ENGAGEMENT INTO VIOLENT GANGS: Lessons from Nairobi's informal settlements

Informal Settlements Ecosystem (from the interviewee's perception)	From research to policies that contribute to improve the Ecosystem towards building a vision of the future
Poor planning	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Slums lack adequate infrastructure Slums lack safe public spaces Slums lack services, in particular schools 	<p>Improve upgrading programs to repair physical decay and sense of abandon in slums</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve infrastructure in slums to increase the youth's perception of security <p>Develop and set up requalification plans for public spaces in slums to improve the youths' security and its perception</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the number of public schools in slums and enable youths to access them
Poverty traps	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families lack assets and capital to increase their capacity to access food, services and markets. Youths must help their families economically 	<p>Improve programs to economically empower families trapped in poverty. Reduced poverty can facilitate families into guiding the youths.</p>
Lack of parental guidance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents lack time to guide the youths Parents lack information on what their children do 	<p>Favor information sharing within the community so that the parents know what their children do.</p>
Risk of dropping out school (poor education)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Studies are a long process Studies require money Studies do not provide income 	<p>Develop strategies to keep youths at school (reduce dropping out)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce the gap between studies and access to employment Empower the family in order for them to send children to school Mentor the youths on the importance of education Monitor their habits and attitude towards school
Violent Milieu	
	<p>Educate youths to change the perception that Violence is 'normal' and the only way to earn one's living</p>

HOW TO REDUCE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE ACTIVATORS: Lessons from Nairobi's informal settlements

Violence activators (from the interviewee's perception)	From research to policies that contribute to reduce the effects of violence activators
Peer pressure	
	<p>Control, reduce and direct pressure from peers through education and adult guidance</p> <p>Help youths to learn making decision on their own</p>
Negative mentorship	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From media 	<p>Control and direct social pressure from media</p> <p>Teach youths on how to listen to, and deal with media</p>
Gang Ideology, Culture, Mentality	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Misleading mentality aimed at changing the living standard through making easy money Use of drugs Use of micro-language – slang – codes Learning and sharing techniques and strategies Gradual learning from small robbery to criminal carrier 	<p>Contribute to the cultural transition from a 'daily livelihood' mentality to building a vision of the future.</p> <p>Promote community initiatives in which youth can be involved</p> <p>Transfer the knowledge of ex gang members to operators of the civil society and police staff</p> <p>Understand what strategies and tools to develop to intervene at the different moments of a youth's criminal carrier, from inception to advanced techniques and risk.</p>

HOW TO IMPROVE THE TANDEM JUDICIAL /POLICE SYSTEM : Lessons from Nairobi’s informal settlements	
Factors contributing to violence activators and youth engagement in violent gangs	From research to policies that contribute to improve the efficiency and satisfaction with the tandem judicial/police system
Low efficiency and low satisfaction with police and judicial system	<p>Do not fight against, but listen to, youths.</p> <p>Transfer the knowledge of ex gang members - use of micro-language, slang, codes, use of techniques and strategies- to operators of the judicial and police system</p> <p>Understand what strategies and tools to develop to intervene at the different moments of a youth’s criminal carrier, from inception to advanced techniques and risk, to reduce their risk of entering the phase of no return – “<i>where you cannot stop</i>”- and dying</p>

HOW TO COUNTER RISK OF BACKSLIDING INTO VIOLENT GANGS: Lessons from Nairobi’s informal settlements	
Factors of risk of backsliding	From research to policies that support the painful transition
Difficulties to resinsert into the community	<p>Promote the youths’ change from being aggressive and dangerous to becoming useful members of their communities</p> <p>Facilitate the ex-gang members’ insertion in the community</p>
Difficulties of relationships with the family	Support the reconstruction of family bonds
Economic hardship	Favour ex-gang members’ economic empowerment
Lack of a vision of the future	Contribute to build an idea of FUTURE for ex-gang members.

CONCLUSIONS

This case study confirms the importance of understanding trajectories of engagement and disengagement at the micro-experience level. It also shows the pertinence of considering former gang members’ narratives and individual case study analysis to formulate recommendations towards better policies. More research is needed in this sense, including comparative analysis of multiple case studies to elaborate on consistent evidence that can inform policies.

Trajectories of engagement relied, in our case study, on factors such as identity and roles within groups and the need of resources of easy access typically denied to slum dwellers. Trajectories of disengagement relied instead, to an immediate analysis, on depletion of the gang network due to armed conflicts with police and deaths. This poses an important question: Did the interviewee decide to change his lifestyle because he was isolated? This could suggest that police interventions contribute to criminality reduction, with obvious consequences on policies. More importantly, what needs to be remembered is that, once back to ‘normal’, the participant could understand the urgency of change in the police approach. From fighting to listening and supporting the youths.

Ex-members of violent gangs are living proof that: 1) Change of lifestyle is possible; 2) it requires support, community networks, and economic empowerment; 3) most likely, they have the deepest form of knowledge of such contexts and are the primary source needed to investigate and counter youth engagement in these networks. Capitalizing the deep knowledge of the context and the social and cognitive skills of formerly engaged youth is also emphasized here as a strategic approach to help the youths, formulate better policies and trigger changes in the judicial and police systems.

This case study illustrates risks and benefits of a gang life, the key-actors in supporting the transition and the impact of poverty traps on the risk of backsliding to networks of violence. Human agency is central both in the creation of opportunities for engagement into violence, and the creation of opportunities for exiting violence. This paper raises questions regarding policies that can contribute to shaping human agency needed to exit violence and reverse violence traps.

Drawing on Mr Kimani’s experience we also understand that there is a tilting point in both engagement and

disengagement dynamics. Can we identify it and act on it to reverse paths of engagement, or encourage disengagement?

HOW TO MOVE AHEAD?

Identify (to encourage) the tilting point of commitment back to a 'normal' life

- What are the individual factors (related to the family) that lead to the changeover?
- What are the social factors (community, society and politics) that lead to the shift?

Understand how previous engagement helps back to counter other youths' engagement

- Which skills are required?
- What role do ex-gang members can cover on the field?

Understand how we can capitalize on former experience/knowledge from youths who exited violent networks – not leave them alone!

- Who are the main actors who can help in doing this?
- Which resources are necessary?

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