

THE SCAVENGERS OF DANDORA

The biggest dump in Kenya is home to mountains of waste and a plenitude of foraging wildlife. But thousands of people also carve their lives out of their findings in Nairobi's Dandora Dump
By Jill Craig

Magazines, aluminium cans, plastic bottles, condoms, syringes, diapers, fruit peelings, milk cartons, tin cans with rough edges, champagne bottles, disposable coffee cups, birthday cards, broken flip flops, electrical wiring and even a discarded toilet.

These are the trappings of our lives. When you and I are finished using them, we simply throw them out, with little cognisance or recognition of their continuing journeys. Never to be thought of again. At least not by us.

But when we toss something into that abyss, the job is just beginning for others.

The Controversy

Dandora Dump is a sprawling dumpsite, over 30 acres, at the intersection of the informal Nairobi settlements of Baba Ndogo, Dandora, Kariobangi North and Korogocho. It is the biggest dump in Kenya and one of the largest in Africa. It opened in 1975 and was deemed full by 2001. Yet it continues to operate. And people at the very bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder come here as their last hope to make an honest living.

According to a 2007 study conducted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Dandora receives approximately 2,000 tonnes of trash every day, comprising a toxic mix of plastic, rubber, lead paint-treated wood, and even some chemical and hospital waste.

So just imagine what living in this environment can do to children who are working without proper hand or foot protection, who are breathing in the fumes of burning trash, and whose daily meals are coming directly from the backs of dump trucks.

UNEP found that half of the 328 children it tested for this study had concentrations of lead in their blood exceeding internationally accepted levels. Almost half of the children also suffered from respiratory, gastrointestinal and/or dermatological diseases.

Not only this, but due to the close proximity of the Nairobi River, which flows just metres from the dumpsite, waste is leeching into the water supply and affecting those residents who live downstream.

But despite these environmental and health concerns, the people scavenging in Dandora feel that they have no other way of making a living. Many have grown up there. If the dump is relocated, they will be denied their livelihoods



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and life will become even more difficult than it already is.

The Nairobi City Council has said that it will be relocating the dump to Ruai, but opponents argue that the birds flying around the dump could cause aircraft accidents as Ruai is on the flight path from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. However, the Ministry of Local Government has asked the city council to find a different location, so plans to move the dump seem to be going forward.

Stepping into Another World

Intrigued and horrified by the idea that people actually live and scavenge in a dump, I asked my taxi driver James if he might be willing to accompany me, mostly to navigate to the site since my directional sense is not the best. He politely turned me down, "Jill, I do not want to go that place. But I will see if my friend Mike will go. He is out of work."

Mike and I set off for Dandora on a rainy Wednesday morning. Mike had worked as a driver for a tour company for over 20 years, but had recently lost his job. He told me that he was now lucky to make KSH 500 per day.

We found our local guide Samuel waiting for us at the petrol station outside the entrance to Dandora. He told us that the airport truck had just arrived. According to Samuel, the airport truck is the most coveted by the workers at the dump. The trucks are ranked according to value, so the airport truck is first, followed by those from richer areas like Muthaiga and Runda, down to the slums, like Kibera and Mathare.

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As we sopped through the dump – it had rained heavily that morning – I noticed something that looked like an auction. The truck had just left and people were swarming around in a semi-circle. I noticed a kid with a toothbrush and some crackers in his hand. He started eating the crackers, then bent down into the trash pile, selected a coffee creamer, and started drinking it.

Everywhere, people were eating what they found from this truck deposit. And since it was from the airport, they were devouring

remnants of discarded airplane meals, sugar packets, already half-eaten pieces of fruit, slices of bread, and drinking from partly-consumed water and mini-liquor bottles.

This food is one of the main reasons so many people come to the dump, as James Bhuop can attest. He operates the St. Priscah Childhood and Rehabilitation Centre near the Dandora dump to encourage children to stay in school instead of scavenging. His centre lacks funding for a feeding programme, so one of the biggest problems he faces is student absenteeism.

"There are some foods there, the foods coming from the airport, they are not good foods, they are used ones. So the dumpsites are where bad things are being thrown. Those kids, being [that] they lack food, they just go there to collect some things which they can eat. That is the problem."

And as you can imagine, when all this waste is thrown into the same place, the food cannot be safe. Dr. Njoroge Kimani is a clinical biochemist who served as the principle investigator of that 2007 UNEP study. He says that this food causes health problems for those eating it.

"Well, for one thing, let's talk about the quality of that food stuff. Let's talk about bacterial infections. The food could be infected, such that they [the scavengers] experience food poisoning by eating whatever has been dumped there. There could be toxic elements there, which start destroying the organs. What about parasites? They could also be getting parasites through their mouth. You see, why is this food being dumped there? Maybe it has been declared unfit for human consumption. But here, there are human beings who are taking that food."

Photographs: Jill Craig

Children At Work

Pigs were rolling around in this muck, and marabou storks almost my size were competing with the people for whatever morsels could be found in the dump pile. I looked behind me, at a child digging through the trash and noticed one of these storks pacing rather ominously behind him.

I returned my gaze to the kid with the toothbrush. This soft spoken, thoughtful boy told me his name was Joseph. After some questioning, I learned that he was 16 years old and had been forced to drop out of school in January because of his family's inability to pay his school fees. He now lives with his grandmother in the nearby slum of Korogocho and he worked at the dump because he didn't want to "snatch," or pickpocket. He preferred to make an honest living.

Joseph quickly became the impromptu fourth member of our group, pointing things out to me that I wouldn't have otherwise noticed.

He showed me some kids about his age sniffing glue. This is one of the ways children are able to stave off hunger and deal with the daily dull trauma of street life. The addiction is so strong and the effects to the brain so horrific, that it's almost impossible to reverse the damage once they start.

According to Erick Wilson, the Acting Chairman for Folks Vision Kenya, a group helping young people in Dandora, the problem of drug use inside the dump is severe. He told me that many times, these children are even used to transport drugs or weapons. They are often paid in drugs.

"What they go through is very traumatising. Once they do things like drugs, they get hooked up, they develop a dependency, and

drugs are used as a bait, to enable them to work. If they transport these drugs, they'll get a certain take."

Everyone is an Entrepreneur

Samuel also told me that people would take some of the food they found from the airport truck and then sell it to people living in the nearby slums. This includes everything that you and I consume or pick over during a typical in-flight meal service. Coffee creamers, pieces of fruit, complimentary nuts, wrapped or unwrapped sandwiches, brownies and cake, mini-liquor bottles, water bottles. This can all be sold. There are a tremendous number of entrepreneurs working in Dandora; the need to survive tends to encourage this.

We started toward the interior. Ad hoc piles were arranged everywhere. Cans here, plastic bottles there, discarded



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complimentary flight magazines in a heap. Joseph would occasionally alert me to a used condom, sanitary napkin, or diaper he noticed on the ground. People in the dump organise truck contents into piles, so they can collect and then sell them to someone else. Joseph told me that he is fortunate if he makes KSH 200 per day from these sales.

At one point, I backed up to take a photograph and the ground started sinking. I was suddenly in muck up to my knee, reminding me of quicksand, and I had to scramble to get back onto solid ground. "Pole, madam," Samuel told me. He told me to follow his footsteps, so such things did not happen again. "Last week, we had a mzungu up to his chest here because he did not watch."

I noticed a group of guys gathered around a lean-to of sorts. I asked Samuel what this was. He said that young men played pool there. I walked over and saw a few of them arguing over something. Samuel introduced me to a gent named Julius, who was in charge of this operation.

Julius told me that he had recently acquired the pool table from a friend and now was able to make some money from these guys playing. Apparently, he charged KSH 10 per game, and was able to make KSH 200 per day through this business. Another guy wearing a baseball cap with "Brooklyn" scrawled across the front told me that the table was "a gift from God."

I asked Julius what he would do if the Nairobi City Council decided to close down the dump.

"What do I do? What do I start my life with? I don't know. I have some money that I have saved. I will have to eat it all. Then I'll have to start thinking of snatching from people... because, you can see, I've always been here. I don't know anywhere else. So what should I do?"

The hard life and desperation that has driven people to live off the rubbish of the more fortunate could easily turn them to living off what they could take, once cast offs are no longer an option. However Kenyan resourcefulness and an unwillingness to "snatch," like Joseph's, have often found alternate life paths for people, from legitimate work elsewhere to aid from various churches and organisations.

Hospital Castoffs

After I finished this conversation with Julius, Joseph picked up a razor blade and told

me that I had almost knelt on it. He said that it came from the hospital truck – he then pointed to a green truck in the distance, indicating, "that one."

Horrified, I asked if he saw many of these. Nodding, he simply said, "Yes," they were common, and the problem was that "bad people" used them as weapons when they found them. Joseph said that they would fight you with these newly discovered 'tools'. He also said that the police would randomly come into the dump and beat up people who had them.

In addition to the problem of using discarded hospital items such as needles as weapons, Dr. Kimani says that dumping hospital waste here has severe health consequences. "You go to the hospital when you are sick, which makes the hospital environment very infectious. Now whatever you've been using in the hospital, you dump them somewhere. You are transferring that hospital environment to people who are not aware of it. Maybe you have used these sharp needles, scalpel blades or syringes and they might be infected. There is HIV, there is hepatitis, there are other viral diseases, which will get into the system."

The Dump Affects Us All

Samuel told me that pigs from the dump are being sold to middlemen, who then sell the animals to meat companies. Dr. Kimani corroborates this fact.

"You might also realise that we have animals feeding from there. We have chickens, we have goats, we have cows, we have pigs. When they are slaughtered, they might end up [in] the market. And you might be a victim of taking the same food. So it comes to us through the food chain. There is vegetation there, there is vegetation downstream. We might end up receiving vegetables which have been contaminated by the environment there."

Dr. Kimani is referring to the Nairobi River, which runs by the dumpsite. This water is used to irrigate produce that the general population might later consume.

Wilson agrees that this is a problem. "There's a lot of vegetables being grown there. And these vegetables end up in markets, various markets, sensitive spots around Nairobi, which people buy without knowing where it has come from."

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Relativity and Finding Solutions

After we got back into the car, I asked Mike what he thought of the experience. He just kept shaking his head, saying, "I never knew that people lived like that." He was shocked.

So here is Mike, a guy who is lucky if he makes KSH 500 a day, horrified by the lives that Dandora residents are living. He is quite privileged compared to them. The thought is mind-boggling.

The question of what to do with Dandora Dump is not an easy one. There are more than 3 million residents of Nairobi, all needing to dispose of their refuse. The population will only increase in the coming years. Those working in the dump are already flirting with survival and relocating it will remove their primary source of meagre income. But continuing to expose people, and especially children, to such a lethal brew on a daily basis surely cannot help anyone in the long run.

As Dr. Kimani told me, "These kids, their systems are still developing. So the long-term effect of this exposure starts taking shape right from the time they are young. Which is the biggest problem."

If the city council does move the Dandora Dump, it must ensure that proper environmental protections and regulations are put into place this time. It must also help these workers to find some other source of employment, so they can stay off the streets and provide for their families. Otherwise, the new dumpsite will simply be a relocation, not an improvement. **D**

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