

# THE OVERLOOKED LINK:



## FOOD SAFETY AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN NAIROBI'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

by Collins bulinda

# A CASE OF KIBERA AND MATHARE

In the heart of Nairobi lie Kibera and Mathare, two of Kenya's most iconic informal settlements. Densely populated, economically vibrant, and socio-politically complex. These settlements are home to hundreds of thousands of residents who navigate daily challenges that range from poor infrastructure to unreliable access to basic services. The overcrowding ratio for the two settlements ranges between 6-8 people per 6x8ft room significantly exceeds the UN Habitats threshold of less than 3 persons per room. Among the many pressing concerns in these areas, two issues stand out: food safety and social protection. While extensive programming has aimed to improve food access through social assistance interventions, the quality and safety of that food are still seriously overlooked.

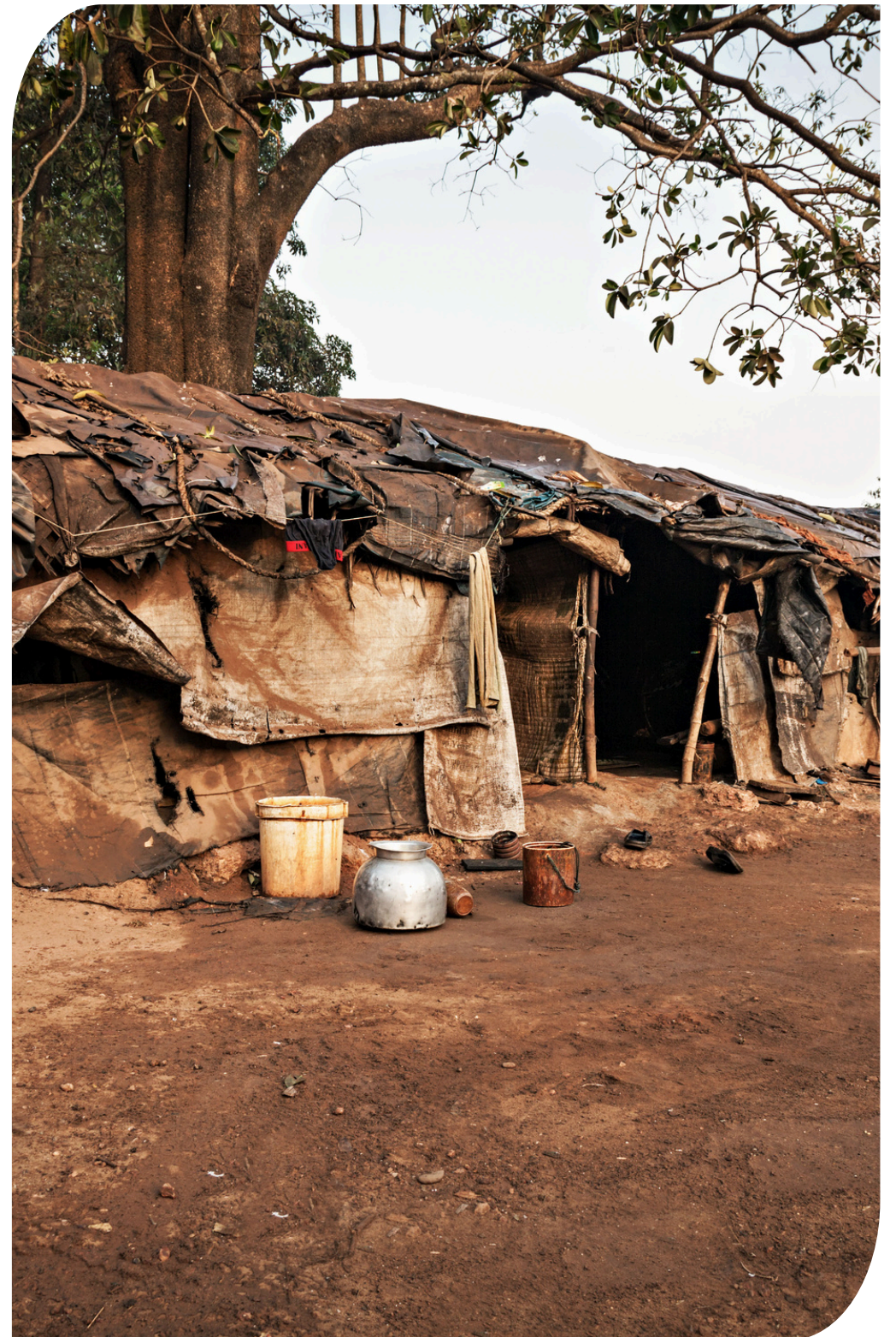


# I. FOOD SAFETY IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS: A SILENT CRISIS<sup>2</sup>

Food safety, often an invisible component of nutrition security, is a great concern in these settlements. In areas like Kibera and Mathare, food is often sold through informal vendors who operate in environments with poor sanitation, limited access to clean water, and minimal food storage infrastructure. This means that the risk of contamination from pathogens, toxins, or unsafe handling practices is high.

Studies show that foodborne illnesses disproportionately affect low-income urban populations. According to Grace[1], residents in informal urban settings are ten times more likely to consume unsafe food compared to their wealthier urban counterparts. Similarly, Oloo[2] highlights that Kenya's informal food markets, though essential for food access, are under-regulated and vulnerable to microbial contamination and chemical residues.

Yet despite this high risk, food safety interventions remain peripheral in the programming of food security and nutrition initiatives in urban poor contexts of Nairobi.



[1] Grace, D. (2015). Food safety in low and middle income countries. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 12(9), 10490-10507.

[2] Oloo, J. E. O. (2010). Food safety and quality management in Kenya: An overview of the roles played by various stakeholders. *African Journal of Food, Agriculture, Nutrition and Development*, 10(11).

## Some public initiatives

The Nairobi City County has undertaken several initiatives to enhance food safety in the urban environment. Through its Public Health and Sanitation Department, the county regularly inspects and licenses food vendors, butcheries, eateries, and markets, enforces the Public Health Act and the Food, Drugs and Chemical Substances Act (Cap 242 and Cap 254), and often closes non-compliant food establishments[1]. In parallel, the county has invested in the rehabilitation of key urban food markets, including Wakulima, Gikomba, and City Park, to improve hygiene infrastructure such as drainage, waste management, and clean water supply, while also introducing designated food vending zones to minimize the risks associated with roadside vending. These efforts are supported by legislative and policy reforms, notably the development of the Nairobi City County Food System Strategy (2021 draft), which integrates food safety into urban food resilience, and the formulation of by-laws that promote safe urban agriculture and regulate pesticide use in urban farming. Among other efforts, through its Dishi Na County program, Nairobi City County aims to address food.



[1] <https://www.citizen.digital/news/shock-over-dirty-state-of-nairobi-kiosk-selling-smochas-kebabs-eggs-n347854>

## 2. SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMING<sup>4</sup> IN KIBERA AND MATHARE

Kenya has made notable strides in expanding social protection to vulnerable populations. Programs like Inua Jamii, the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP), and COVID-19 cash transfer schemes have sought to shield households from extreme poverty and food insecurity. In informal settlements, numerous NGOs and community-based organizations have supplemented these efforts through food distribution, school feeding, and emergency cash support.

However, a recurring gap in these interventions is their focus on access over quality. Most social assistance programs measure success in terms of food quantity or affordability, with little attention to whether the food consumed is safe, nutritious, or hygienically prepared.

A review by the World Bank[1] noted that while Kenya's social protection system is among the most progressive in Sub-Saharan Africa, integration with public health risks like food safety remains underdeveloped. Furthermore, Kenya's social protection framework struggles with coverage gaps (exclusion errors), fragmented delivery, and inadequate shock responsiveness.



[1] World Bank. (2020). Kenya Social Protection Sector Review.

### 3. THE MISSING LINK: FOOD SAFETY IN THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL PROTECTION

By failing to address food safety, social assistance programs risk undermining their own objectives. Unsafe food can cause illnesses that increase household vulnerability, reduce productivity, and strain healthcare systems. For children and the elderly, foodborne illnesses can be life-threatening and have long-term consequences on physical and cognitive development.

Tumilowicz et al. (2015)[1] argue that social protection must safeguard not just access to food, but access to safe and nutritious food. In settlements like Mathare, for example, cash transfers may allow families to purchase meals, but with limited options, many turn to roadside vendors whose food may be contaminated.

The net effect? Social transfers meant to improve well-being may expose beneficiaries to health risks, nullifying the protective intent of such interventions.



[1] Tumilowicz, A., Ruel, M. T., Pelto, G., Pelletier, D., Monterrosa, E. C., Lapping, K., ... & Sturke, R. (2019). Implementation science in nutrition: concepts and frameworks for an emerging field of science and practice. *Current Developments in Nutrition*, 3(3), nzy080.

## 4. COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES AND EMERGING INNOVATIONS

Some community-led and NGO-driven initiatives are beginning to recognize this gap and respond innovatively. In Kibera, SHOFCO has piloted community kitchens where meals are prepared under standardized hygienic conditions for vulnerable households. These kitchens not only provide food but ensure safety through trained cooks, proper facilities, and food handling guidelines.

In the Country, some NGOs have introduced mobile training programs to equip informal food vendors with basic knowledge of hygiene, storage, and preparation. APHRC reports[1] that such localized interventions can significantly reduce incidences of foodborne illness when linked with broader health and food aid programs.

Digital tools are also emerging: SMS-based alerts on food safety risks or mobile inspections in Nairobi's informal markets offer scalable ways to incorporate food safety surveillance into broader social programs.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Food security and food safety are two sides of the same coin, especially in Kenya's informal settlements, where the risks of unsafe food are high and the resilience of households is fragile. By embedding food safety within social assistance programming, Kenya can better safeguard not just the stomachs, but the health, dignity, and rights of its urban poor. In Kibera and Mathare, where vulnerability is high but community resilience is strong, it is time for policy and practice to evolve toward truly nutritional safety nets.

[1] African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC). (2022). Feasibility and Effectiveness of Urban Farming and Food Safety Interventions in Promoting Household Food Security and Nutrition Among Vulnerable Populations in Informal Settlements in Nairobi

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

To bridge the gap between food access and food safety, a few strategic steps are essential:



Integrate food safety indicators into the design and monitoring of social assistance programs.



Promote vouchers redeemable only at certified vendors or scaled clean kitchens, thus incentivizing safe food practices.



Support and finance community kitchens, safe food markets, and mobile training for vendors



Establish inter-agency collaborations between public health, agriculture, and social protection departments to ensure that food assistance policies address quality alongside access



Involve residents of informal settlements in co-designing food safety interventions that fit their realities.