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TITLE WALKING DEBATE: NAIROBI
Geographies of resisting food insecurity by contemporary urban Africans

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HOST/S Global Soil Forum, Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS)

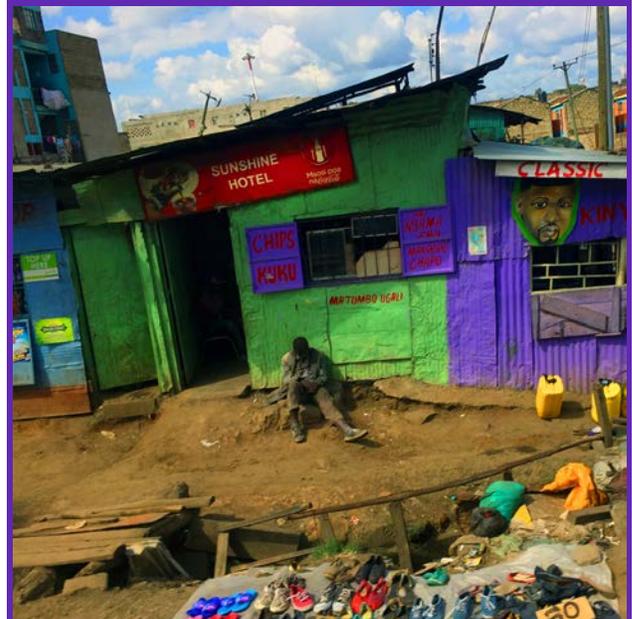
WEB www.globalsoilweek.org/african-soil-seminar-2016
and www.globalsoilweek.org/thematic-areas/transforming-cities/critical-dialogue-platform

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Lecturer and PhD Candidate of Critical Urban & Social Thought, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, Canada. Her work as an academic, policy analyst, critical planner and community organizer highlights the paradoxical 'marginalized centrality' which both erases and depends on low-income women of colour for human survival. It proposes an extension of the spatio-temporal analytics of human geography from a labour-land duality to a triad with the social body. In her scholarly and activist engagements Khosla positions the violent production of race, gender and sexual bodies - individual and social - as the hidden-in-plain-sight precondition for the viability of economic, spatial, and therein environmental systems.

NAIROBI
securitized.
insecure.



My excitement and anticipation of arriving in Nairobi on the opening night of the African Soil Seminar was interrupted by a pilot announcement that Jomo Kenyatta airport was closed due to a small aircraft accident. Many hours and a detour to Kilimanjaro airport later we landed in the city of bougainvillea and barbed wire. It is very late in the night as the taxi sweeps into town. The beauty and bare life of this booming modern African metropolis is evident as is the unmistakable smell of murrum and soil after an African rain.

This is not my first visit but a return. My hotel in Westlands is up the road from my Aunt's house where I stayed as a child in the days when this neighbourhood was still a leafy suburb. At the hotel gate the car is stopped by a coterie of security guards. The taxi driver is unfazed as they open doors, scan the car's underside with mirrors, check the boot and glove compartment for weapons and bombs. This is everyday life in Nairobi but it doesn't end there. An additional two guards, a metal detector scanner and x-ray conveyor belt for bags await me at the hotel doorway. This is the first of many reminders that we are in the city of the Westgate Mall, where the Al-Shabaab attacks of 2013 left 67 people dead and 175 injured. Local reality dovetails with the US led war on terror to electrify the rusting barbed wire fences of the colonial era, making security a growth sector for urban infrastructure and jobs. Polarisation here now means that wealth is black, brown and white but poverty and precarity are still patently black.

Piecing together the story of the airport closure over the next few days I learned that it was indeed a small aircraft whose landing gear failed. There was no crash – the pilot miraculously landed safely on its belly, but the airport closure was triggered by the fact that it was a *Somali* plane. Somalis in Kenya face intense targeted policing, racial profiling, state sanction and social ostracism. Legacies of racial segregation that have long divided Nairobi along European, Indian, and African lines, are now accompanied by a splintering Blackness spurred by regional conflicts

among post-colonial elites, terror talk and the global language of 21st Century militarized social control.

Smallness makes and marks the global city

The hotel, like Nairobi, is a hub of international, regional and local visitors. On the terrace I overhear an investors' meeting. At the crowded breakfast buffet I unwittingly find myself sharing a table with two Ugandan gay activists going home after a regional NGO seminar on human rights for LGBTQ peoples in East Africa. Home for one of them turns out to be Tororo the town where I was born. We grin and embrace stunned at the serendipitous smallness of the world.

The Urban face of land governance, restoration, sustainable use and tenure are evident in Nairobi's morning commute. Our twenty-minute drive from the hotel to the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) where the seminar takes place takes nearly two hours, as we encounter the massive traffic jam that greets Nairobi residents on a daily basis. Overcrowded and under-serviced Matatus, scooters and unpaved pedestrian pathways carrying the working poor weave through the crush of personal SUVs, limousines, luxury and economy cars, chartered busses, taxi and unmarked Ubers lined up on the city's arterial roads.

At the roadsides, Nairobi's food and tea vendors serve breakfast to the less affluent, while others openly hawk their wares to moneyed households. On sale in the muddy streetscape alongside Peponi, Thigiri Ridge, Muthaiga and Limuru roads,

handcrafted wooden furniture is on display along with rows and rows of tropical plants for landscaped gardens, arts, crafts and fresh cut flowers.



Picture 1. Market aside artery, Mathare
Lens: Keerthi Kiran Bandru

Construction cranes and the concrete skeletons of condominium complexes and commercial centres are everywhere. Land ownership is out of reach for many working people as Nairobi's land grabs extend past the graft of local elites, into the international urban property market. The city's land prices shot up more than 500% between 2008 and 2015¹. Our bus driver confirms the realities documented in extensive academic research. Most working people, he tells me, can no longer afford housing in the city. He lives in a village on the outskirts and commutes two hours each way, everyday.

The people's convivial city

People clearly make this work. The population of Nairobi has grown exponentially

from 120,000 in the 1940s to a present day population of 3.5 million. There are many 'Nairobis' – a series of parallel realities that exist and operate in and alongside each other. All exist within the geographical boundaries of the city occupying distinct yet inseparable social, racial, gendered, class and economic topographies. I ask the driver how he survives the harrowing congestion and he smiles saying he, like everyone else, takes it "polé polé" (slowly slowly in Swahili). He asks me to listen to the sound of the traffic - we have been in a frustrating traffic jam for over an hour and, remarkably, nobody is "tooting" his/her horn.

The land grabbing, segregated, splintered, unequal inheritances of colonial Nairobi are indelibly etched into the physical, economic, social and political terrain of postcolonial, neoliberal, globalized Nairobi. Not far below this urban scramble for possession and power is a rich heritage of collective defiance, refusal, subversion and resistance rooted in anti-colonial movements. Incessant narratives depicting a violent city crumble in the face of Nairobi's vibrant streets.

Reflections on the African Soil Seminar

In the sessions and informal contacts with fellow participants at the soil seminar, a rurality, lack of focus on structured social inequality, and implicit pressure to reach for readily available models and solutions, shaped the conversations. We heard and learned about compelling local and regional research; inspiring individual farming projects; and the important

breakthroughs in legal and policy initiatives being undertaken by academics, advocates, farmers, social activists and government representatives. Many touched on select social dimensions and factors that impact and/ or intersect with issues of food security, land tenure, governance and sustainability.

There was however little emphasis on the role and naturalised assumptions of the overarching realities of neoliberal privatisation, competition, entrepreneurialism, and individualism. This underlying logic is an imperative that creates an assumed emphasis on private land ownership, corporate control of the food chain by agribusiness, and gendered downloading of subsistence and survival onto the bodies of overworked and unpaid women.

Reporting on local initiatives and sharing policy and practice are unquestionably necessary. Yet, the fundamental importance of forging a critical understanding of the systemic patterns, players, and predominant political economic frameworks shaping soil, land, access to food and sustainability cannot be underestimated. There is a pressing need to move past the enumeration of differential impacts to examine and address the active processes of de-development, devaluation, dispossession, political disenfranchisement and social dehumanisation at play.

An example of this active and escalating social pattern is the regular gesticulations to gendered impacts without attention to the dehumanising work of gendered

assumptions. The work of African women in ensuring subsistence for their families and communities by persistently growing, procuring, preparing and provisioning food is widely documented. In the food security thematic session discussion on how to encourage youth to become farmers and connect to food security issues, the longstanding cultural link between farming and “grandmothers” was repeatedly positioned as a major taboo and deterrent to youth interest. The resulting call to displace older women who have been feeding their communities misses the need to break down the gendered devaluations of their essential work. Further, it misses the opportunity to transform this ‘conflict’ into new modes of social solidarity that envision and create models to re-value contributions of women and ‘grandmothers’ as carriers of crucial traditional and contemporary knowledge.

[Walking Debate: Nairobi](#)

[Geographies of resisting food insecurity by contemporary urban Africans](#)

The walking debate was an important opportunity to focus on the urban, social and structural dimensions of the themes of the African Soil Seminar. Looking through an urban lens at the city in which we were gathered allowed us to meet, listen to and witness the contexts, contestations and creative work of local grassroots actors in Nairobi’s oldest informal settlement, Mathare. It also brought into focus the crucial role of political contentions in stopping and reversing the land grabs that had begun to encroach on the city’s beautiful urban forest – Karura. At both

sites, taking account of urban development processes, multi-scalar political forces, social inequalities, and infrastructural commitments were all necessary in shedding light on local issues as well as taking up the thematic threads of the African Soil Seminarⁱⁱ.

dusty, poor, unpaved part of the city. Mathare is the antithesis of the UN section of Nairobi where ICRAF's green, clean, paved and well-maintained grounds edge around the present day diplomatic grandeur of the old colonial Muthaiga district.



Picture 2. Ghetto Foundation, Mathare
Lens: Natasha Aruri

Mathare

Driving through the congested Nairobi traffic on the way to Mathare we are given some important background on Nairobi's urban settlements, the social, legal and political framework of urban agriculture projects, and key sustainability issues. Anne Kiruri, County Director of Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resources - Nairobi City County, fills us in on the important 2014 Nairobi City County legislation. It halted the longstanding criminalisation of urban agriculture in the city by legalising the practice for the purpose of improving food security and encouraging urban food production for both subsistence and commercial purposesⁱⁱⁱ.

On arrival in Mathare we climb out of the bus to find ourselves in a busy, crowded,

Mathare began to be settled in the 1920's and is one of the oldest slums in Nairobi^{iv}. Walking into the dense complex of corrugated iron shanty shacks that stretch for miles around us, it is evident that 'Informal settlement' is a problematic euphemism for this community of thirteen villages and two hundred thousand people. The implication that this is an ephemeral space is deeply mistaken. Mathare has been growing and developing into a necessary but unsupported part of the city's urban housing stock for close to a hundred years. Any lack of formality here, or in any of Nairobi's residential slums is clearly the accumulated effect of an active neglect and refusal to engage, plan, regulate or invest by urban and political authorities.

This neglect is seen across the African continent and is couched in urban plans that scholar Vanessa Watson calls "urban

fantasies". These fictional dreams of development are anchored in and mask the driving forces of "speculative urbanism" that means "the main business of government has become that of land speculation and the dispossession of those living on land earmarked for private development."^v Since 2008 the Kenyan government has explicitly aimed at making Nairobi a "world class Metropolis"^{vi}. The realities of Mathare as they hit my eyes, nose and ears have clearly been left off the drawing board.



Picture 3. Mathare
Lens: Punam Khosla

No debate – Just walking the talk

Participants fall into a silence as we are engulfed by the pong of sewage, and make our way on narrow rocky mud paths through piles of garbage. The weight of public health issues is apparent everywhere. As we walk there is little debate. This everyday environment extends across the many slums that collage and ring the city, and is stunning in its scale. More than 60% of Nairobi residents make life in these conditions.

The evidence is incontrovertible. Food security, sustainable livelihoods, soil and environmental concerns are visibly inseparable from the profoundly urban questions before us. The prevailing tendency to separate environmental issues from human life and urban space is untenable. Bodies and urban processes are critical, immediate and structuring dimensions of the work of ensuring access to food, sustainable land, space and place, and a social security that centres the life and livelihood over the protection of private property and elite interests.

We are here to walk with and learn the many dimensions of life in this 'informal settlement.' I worry that we are running the risk of becoming part of the problematic trend towards commodification of misery through international slum tourism. But I am also keenly aware and respectful of the expertise, purpose and generosity of our hosts, presenters and discussants.

We are in the company of local residents, activists, scholars and policy-makers whose grassroots knowledge production; policy and program interventions through urban governance structures; collective organising among slum residents; and creative cultural empowerment initiatives have had a major effect on making food accessible and nutritional. These micro-scalar projects are, in effect, extending formal and informal (decentralised) safety nets, advocating and organising around issues of rights and citizenship, and promoting healthy behaviours through forging local learning on environmental issues, and long term social change.

Jack Makau, a long time activist, scholar and organiser for Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and Kuria Gathuru, Coordinator of the Mazingira Institute – Kenya, introduced us to local players. Also walking with us were members of the youth group ‘ghetto foundation’ whose barebones centre is a neighbourhood touchstone of possibility for young women and men. Another was Mathare urban agriculturalist Edwin Odhiambo and Nancy, a leading resident activist, who sits on the board of SDI.



Picture 4. A street, Mathare
Lens: Kara Devonna Siahaan

Infrastructure against insecurity

That people, and especially women, make life in Mathare possible is evident throughout. Women are the main vendors of prepared food, but they also sell fresh produce, eggs, meat and other wares in the stalls that line the earthen roads. During our walk and during my second visit to Mathare, at the invitation of Violet who lives in Mathare and works in my

cousin’s house, the importance of infrastructure is in plain view.

Sanitation is a central public health and food safety issue. Food vendors are pivotal, as most residents cannot afford the money or space to install kitchens in their shacks or apartments. But vendors don’t have the basic requirements to keep their food within public health standards. Activists and scholars working with vendors highlight the lack of food storage space, refrigeration, clean running water, safe and affordable cooking fuel, planned, paved streets, street lighting after dark as key issues facing the women who feed Mathare^{vii}.

Understanding the role of urban infrastructure and social services in food security is key to shifting the emphasis from food production to food access. Local academics, researchers and residents have produced a Zonal Plan for Mathare that speaks to this. Their work is aimed at immediate remediation, but the daily press reports on government graft, political paternalism and land grabbing makes it obvious that the blight of this slum is actively produced through the structural violence of active political abandonment.

While it is not possible to recount the conditions or cite the growing literature on the many and varied dimensions of Mathare’s infrastructural deficiencies in this short commentary, it is important to name the areas of concern: indoor and outdoor access to clean running water as a free municipal service; construction of paved roads and walkways; public garbage collection spaces, systems and services;

street side pipes and a system of publicly maintained latrines connected to urban sewage systems; and affordable, safe, spatially adequate, publically managed, designed and constructed, social housing for the 83% of Mathare residents that pay rent to slum landlords.

As I watch children play around open rivulets of slurry sewage it strikes me that for this community of hardworking Nairobi residents, the installation of baseline sanitation and street paving is the first step that would incentivise residents to upgrade housing structures. I share my perspective on this with Jack Makau and he nods in wholehearted agreement. In subsequent research I discover that he has been pressing this as part of the key principles for the Mathare zonal plan^{viii}.



Picture 5. A street, Mathare
Lens: Punam Khosla

Karura: Environmentalism for whom?

The drive back to Karura in rush hour traffic means our time in the forest is cut short by the rapid nightfall that descends over the

city by 6:30 every evening. The fact that Karura exists as a public green space is the result of active political contention. It is known to the world as the victory of environment activist Wangari Mathaai's work in the Green Belt Movement.

Karura is an emblematic victory against the land grabs that are feeding Nairobi's building boom, as well as the overwhelming political corruption that robs the public purse. It is a fragile victory that remains under threat by the pressures of the private property market.

Professor Njoroge Karanja who worked alongside Wangari Matahaai to save this forest, is our host. He is now the chairman of Friends of the Karura Forest, the group that has been assigned the responsibility of operating, maintaining and husbanding the forest reserve. His enthusiasm is palpable as he runs and talks quickly, as he recounts the past struggle, details the present work, and communicates his optimistic vision for the future of the forest.

My walk in Karura is truncated by my chronic disability, which kicked in at the end of the afternoon forcing me to sit in the chief ranger's jeep. I watch as the group runs to catch up with our passionate and fit host through the forest, as he tells the story of past and present contentions that continue to shape the space. But my enthusiasm is also tempered by the stark contrast between the ecological environmentalism evident in the silence and spacious greenery of Karura versus the bustling bare life of Mathare.



Picture 6. Walking in Karura Forest
Lens: Kara Devonna Siahaan

Also unsettling and instructive are the widely divergent class, race, gender topologies of these spaces. Karura is a public amenity but its daily human users are few, and mostly come from the very wealthy communities of Muthaiga, Runda and the UN compounds that circle the forest. The few people we cross paths with are clearly well-off joggers and cyclists. If this is the profile of the beneficiaries of the fierce fight for public land, space and conservation, we clearly need to rethink the role of conservation in the work of social and ecological justice. Effective privatisation of public lands and green spaces for elite users was hardly the vision that drove Mathaai and her supporters in their hard-won struggle to save the forest from private ownership^{ix}.

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Notes

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- ⁱ Business Daily Africa, January 29, 2015 – accessed online: <http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Upper-Hill-land-most-costly-as-prices-in-Nairobi-up-535pc/539552-2606680-1lyfcv/index.html>
- ⁱⁱ The six thematic threads of the African Soil Seminar are: soil carbon and climate change; food security and nutrition; land governance; financing soil restoration; water management; and urban-rural continuities.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See the Nairobi County Bill at: <http://www.nairobi.go.ke/home/news/urban-agriculture-promotion-and-regulation-act-2015-revisited/>
- ^{iv} Key features of Mathare - source: <http://www.roadmaptomathare.org/about-mathare.html>
- ^v Watson 2013
- ^{vi} *ibid.*
- ^{vii} Corburn et al 2012
- ^{viii} These key principles are listed on the opening page of the Zonal plan produced by SDI, Muungao, The University of Nairobi and the University of California, Berkley: Corburn et al 2012.
- ^{ix} Please see my fellow rapporteur Mary Njenga's report for a more detailed account of the issues in Karura.