



Could Kikaramoja be the poorest slum in Uganda?

The twin slums of Kikaramoja and Soweto serve as a stark demonstration of what can go wrong when people are forgotten and systematically excluded from the structures that enable a decent life. The most pressing needs are food and education. Most residents survive on one meal a day. Most children do not go to school due to lack of fees.

BY ELVIS BASUDDÉ KYEYUNE

Jinja is one of Uganda's most prized showpieces. A modern city, a jewel in the crown of the nation's industrial revival. And in many ways, with its magnificent hotels such as Nile Resort, Nile Bridge Hotel, Pearl of the Nile, King Fisher, Source Garden, and Source of the Nile, it is. A visitor

could be forgiven for thinking this is all Jinja has to offer.

But only a few kilometres from the grandiose Brisk Hotel Triangle and the central headquarters of the Jinja Municipal Council lie other "cities" of a very different kind. The Kikaramoja and Soweto slums will change your image of Jinja forever.

Two slums, one story

Kikaramoja and Soweto sit in the Masese Division, barely two kilometres from the city centre. They face each other across a narrow distance, a stone's throw apart, twins in their misery. Soweto reminds one of a camp for exiled people. Its population of about 6,000 consists largely of internally displaced persons from northern Uganda, who fled the long war led by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army against the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government. The numbers keep growing. The majority live in what you might call a compound surrounded by graves, because the dead

cannot be transported back to their birthplaces.

Inhabitants eke out a subsistence-level existence in appalling, subhuman conditions. Children do not go to school; education is too expensive in

Jinja City. Diseases are rampant. Health facilities are a daydream; there are hardly any. Prostitution is rampant as is the number of people who are living with the virus. This is just a tip of the iceberg, a brief synopsis of Soweto and Kikaramoja's sad story.

The origin of a name

John Mweru, the LC1 chairman of Masese 3, who has lived in the area for more than 30 years, says the name Kikaramoja is borrowed from the Karamoja people of northeastern Uganda. They began migrating here in the early 1970s, searching for employment in what was then a vibrant industrial town.

"There are always new faces of squatters," Mweru says. "More and

The most pressing needs are food and education. Most residents survive on one meal a day. Most children do not go to school due to lack of fees. PHOTOS/ELVIS BASUDDÉ KYEYUNE.

Brewing alcohol is the order of the day.



WHAT IS A SLUM?

The UN Habitat defines a slum as a place lacking one or more of five things: Durable housing, sufficient living area, access to improved water, access to sanitation, and secure tenure. Kikaramoja lacks all five. I spent an entire Sunday there, learning slowly and painfully how the other side of Jinja lives and drinks. A 72-year-old man who has lived here for 35 years told me: «This area tarnishes the reputation of not only Jinja city but the entire eastern region. Those who are human should invite President Museveni to this place to see some of the people he leads and the kind of life they lead. The government should come up with a low-income housing scheme for the people in this slum.»



The area also lacks proper drainage. Water from outdoor bathrooms and rain combines with rubbish and collects in stagnant pools.

running tiny restaurants, selling charcoal, or operating mobile money shops.

Sanitation and sickness

The sanitation situation is disgraceful, owing to the high population. Many residents do not have access to functioning toilets. If you are not very observant, you are likely to wade through human excrement; courtesy of children who do it anywhere.

There are four ramshackle, single-stance pit-latrines, restricted to a few people. Some share one communal pit-latrine with just one squatting hole. Some Karimojong women still nurse the belief that when women go to pit-latrines, they will not bear children. This leads some to resort to open defecation. Others use polythene bags as toilets.

The result is the spread of diarrhoea and other killer diseases. People living in slums encounter numerous health problems: malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/Aids are rampant, yet health facilities are inadequate and unaffordable. The lack of safe water sources, combined with inadequate sanitation, contributes to high rates of water-borne diseases.

The area also lacks proper drainage. Water from outdoor bathrooms and rain combines with rubbish and collects in stagnant pools. A clear swamp inside Kikaramoja welcomes you, together with a huge dumping site for all garbage from Jinja City and Bugembe Town. The smell is unbearable. The stagnant water provides a breeding ground for mosquitoes, increasing the risk of malaria.

The burden on women

With unemployment as high as it is, resources are already grossly overstretched. The burden falls heaviest on women, who must support their families at all costs. Most of these women are market vendors in Jinja city. Some earn a little from washing clothes and dishes in restaurants. Others engage in stone crushing. A few resort to begging to earn a penny to sustain their families.

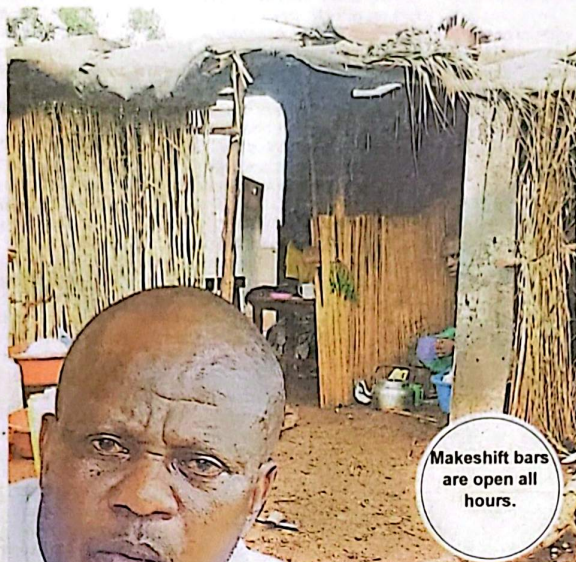
The most pressing needs are food and education. Most residents survive on one meal a day. Most children do not go to school due to lack of fees. An observer I met said these are forgotten people who cannot support themselves.

Is there any hope?

Mweru, the area chairman, says some NGOs are working with the office of the town clerk to regulate sanitation and to see how they can improve services in the area, which was never planned. He says they have created awareness about the dangers of poor sanitation and are warning those constructing houses without pit-latrines.

«There are also some charitable organisations giving health services to the residents of Kikaramoja», Mweru says. «They are working with National Water and Sewage Corporation to ensure the area accesses clean water, on top of managing waste disposal. Some well-intentioned organisations are helping by giving out food and ARVs as a way of improving the livelihood of the despondent residents.»

But some people believe the only real way to save Kikaramoja and Soweto from the ruins of neglect and shame is to upgrade these slums or replace them entirely with proper housing and operational facilities. That, they argue, would enable a healthier environment and do away with hideouts for criminals.



Makeshift bars are open all hours.

More people are fleeing Karamoja even today, because of poverty, hunger, insecurity, fights, and after losing their cows to robbery (cattle rustling). But most importantly, the Karimojong have a unique bond of togetherness. Whoever comes stays with relatives who already live in these crowded places.»

Records from the Jinja Municipal Council indicate that the squatter population is about 7,000 people, including 1,100 children, 700 youth, 2,350 women, 2,198 men, 300 orphans, and 57 people with disabilities. At least 82 percent of them are from Karamoja.

Mweru says the population is so high because access to family planning methods is next to non. Most people have between seven and 10 children, with more than 20 individuals living under one roof in mud and wattle, and makeshift structures. That is the standard form of shelter in this slum.

Walking into Kikaramoja

Entering Kikaramoja is terrifying. There are no visible walkways. Those that exist are in a sorry state. As you go in, you are ushered in by dogs roaming wildly, desperate and uncared for, people here have no time for pets. You are also ushered in by despondent children begging for a coin from you.

Most buildings are overgrown with bushes, clustered and heavily

John Mweru, Chairman LC1, Ssese 3

A resident shows her daughter's grave within the compound.