

Kenya's Informal Childcare Facilities: Preliminary Evidence and Policy Recommendations

Introduction

Kenya's childcare economy is characterized by low-quality childcare services, especially for poor and disadvantaged householdsⁱ. The majority of poor households in Kenya rely on unregulated, informal childcare facilities that frequently fall short of minimum requirementsⁱⁱ. Nevertheless, quality childcare services are not only important for enabling individuals, especially women, to participate in economic activities, earn income, and access education and other social

services, but also for children's early cognitive development and eventual educational outcomesⁱⁱⁱ. In many parts of Kenya, older siblings, particularly girls, care for the younger siblings while their parents work. When affordable and high-quality daycare is available, girls are relieved of this burden, allowing them to attend school on a regular basis and focus on their academics^{iv}.

Research on informal childcare facilities in Kenya has



highlighted their poor state, notably their inadequate ability to safely care for children while simultaneously providing them with a stimulating environment for learning and future development¹. Informal childcare centers' potential and challenges have received far less attention in the country. However, they provide employment for many people, primarily women, and assist many disadvantaged families and children.

This situation analysis is neither a report on childcare trends in Kenya nor a comprehensive assessment of

Kenya's informal childcare facilities. Rather, it is a cautionary snapshot analysis designed to illustrate the quality and problems of childcare facilities that serve millions of children from impoverished urban and rural households across the country. Understanding the circumstances of childcare facilities that presently serve the most impoverished Kenyan households is essential to provide marginalized children and families with access to childcare services that support their success.



Data Source

As part of preliminary data on childcare facilities that serve low-income and vulnerable households in Kenya's informal settlements in Nairobi and Kisumu counties, the evidence presented in this report was generated through field visits and phone interviews with five childcare facilities. The five facilities that were part of this situation study were all owned and operated by women, except for one.



Findings

Tables 1 and 2 present evidence on a few key characteristics and challenges of the facilities. They also highlight data on the aspirations of their operators, the community misconceptions they report about childcare facilities, and their perceptions of growth opportunities in their businesses.



Table 1: Attributes, needs and growth aspirations of selected childcare facilities

Childcare Facility	Location	Years of operation	Motivations for starting a facility	Formal registration status	No. Of children currently in care	Charges (KSh/day)	No. of staff/ helpers	Growth/ changes over time	Growth aspirations	Support needed
1.	Ragumo Zone, Kisumu	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observed need in the community Income source 	Not formally registered	28	50-100	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased number of children Moved from own house to a temporary rented structure Introduced a feeding programme based on learnings from other organizations Operator has been trained in special needs children care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build a permanent, modern daycare facility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government guideline for registering/ licensing of low-income, grassroots childcare facilities Training in childcare provision and making play and learning materials.
2.	Kangundo road Nairobi	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observed need in the community Income source 	Not formally registered	30	100-150	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased demand for facility's services Moved to a smaller room to reduce rent costs Trained on making of children's play and learning materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build a permanent, modern daycare facility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Licensing and registration Training on child handling and first aid skills Awareness creation of government requirements on childcare facilities
3.	Korogocho, Nairobi	24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observed need in the community Income source 	Not formally registered	20	50	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resumed operations in 2010 following 2007-2008 post-election violence Decrease in number of children at the facility Operator received training in childcare, nutrition, and disease awareness Moved to a new rented place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transform into a formal childcare facility Set up other childcare facilities outside the slum community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government recognition of daycares and introduction of a feeding program Government subsidies on licences, fees and charges.

Table 1: Attributes, needs and growth aspirations of selected childcare facilities *Cont'd*

Childcare Facility	Location	Years of operation	Motivations for starting a facility	Formal registration status	No. Of children currently in care	Charges (KSh/day)	No. of staff/ helpers	Growth/ changes over time	Growth aspirations	Support needed
4.	Mathere, Nairobi	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observed need in the community Limited access to care for special needs children in slum settings 	Registered as a community-based organization (CBO), not a childcare facility	18	Free/run through public goodwill	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded from 1 to 8 rooms due to high service demand Increase in number of children with disabilities brought to the facility Have 3 physiotherapists as team members Full day operation of the facility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Larger space Stigma-free support for children with special needs. Expand community outreach and awareness on care, rights, and support for special needs children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government attention to the care needs of special needs children Financial support to facility
5.	Korogocho, Nairobi	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observed need in the community income source 	Not formally registered	15	30-50	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charges to parents and guardians reduced due to high poverty levels Moved to a new location. Has learnt how to do record keeping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand facility to accommodate more children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government to allocate land for childcare facilities Licensing Training for childcare facility operators

Table 2: Misconceptions, barriers, challenges & growth opportunities identified by the surveyed childcare facility operators

Misconceptions	Barriers to quality services	Challenges	Opportunities for growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informal childcare facilities abuse children Operators of informal childcare exploit children for monetary gain In slum settings, childcare providers enable crime and sex work since they take care of children of teen mothers Childcare facilities only benefit parents who work outside of their homes Childcare facilities do not respect or instill cultural values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absence of care policy/guidelines for registration, standards, and general care provision for informal childcare facilities. Lack of a childcare care body for representation Lack of space, especially in slum settings. Inadequate training and professional development for staff Limited facilities for children with special needs and low community awareness of their needs. Limited information for parents on importance of early childhood education Inability to implement quality feeding programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inadequate capacity of parents to pay for childcare services Limited training opportunities for informal childcare service providers Sick children brought to facilities without medical attention Child deaths in daycare facilities due to untreated illnesses/ caregiver abuse/negligence Harassment by government regulatory officials Abandonment of children in facilities Poor infrastructure, including space and sanitation Lack of security measures (e.g. fires, floods, insurance). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships with formal childcare facilities Support by government and private sector Minimum standards for informal childcare facilities Development partners' growing focus on the childcare/care economy

Discussions

The brief evidence presented highlights both the importance of informal childcare facilities as well as the challenges they face. Four of the five facilities had no form of registration, while one which serves children with disabilities was registered as a CBO. Put differently, none of the facilities are authorized by law as a childcare center. For instance, the Nairobi City Care Facilities Act of 2017 states that “a person shall maintain and operate a childcare facility within the county, only if it is registered and licensed in accordance with this Act,” and that violating the Act is punishable by a fine “not exceeding one million shillings or imprisonment for a term of not more than four years.” In addition to several other requirements, the Act requires operators of childcare facilities to provide evidence of the arrangements and measurements of the rooms, including the location of separate toilets for male and female, hand washing facilities, doors and windows; a sketch or diagram of the outdoor play area, indicating if the area is fenced and child friendly as per prescribed standards; a schedule of proposed age-appropriate daily activities for children and proof of compliance with county government rules for any non-public water supply or sewage disposal system^{vi}.

Despite their many shortcomings, the facilities meet key needs for low-income families by caring for children and allowing parents to pursue livelihoods and other activities. Charges in the facilities ranged widely, from free services (offered by the facility for children with disabilities) to 150 shillings daily. Low-income parents' payment for these services is evidence that they value them, even though the prices the operators describe charging seem modest. Nonetheless, these daily fees are not insignificant for many low-income households in Kenya^{vii}.

Misconceptions, a lack of government support, limited access to childcare training opportunities, a lack of suitable and safe spaces, and a shortage of space for safe and quality childcare are among the many obstacles that the facilities and their operators confront. Furthermore, operating



PHOTO: THE CONVERSATION

without formal recognition leaves these facilities vulnerable to frequent disruptions by authorities, with some operators reporting experiences of harassment, most of the time bribing their way out. The facilities also all show great adaptability. To improve the quality of care they give children, some of the operators surveyed had moved to bigger spaces, learned how to make children's play materials, pursued childcare training skills, and introduced feeding programs.



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Conclusion and policy implications

This situation report highlights the potential, significance, and limitations of Kenya's informal childcare services. While many low-income families rely on them for childcare, their ability to provide safe care and promote children's early cognitive development is severely constrained. Several critical policy implications arise from the data about the need to:



- Recognize and integrate informal childcare facilities into formal early childhood education system, rather than shutting them down.



- Pursue tiered, flexible licensing or incremental formalization systems that allow informal providers to gradually meet minimum standards rather than enforcing blanket compliance that could result in closures or drive them further underground.



- Implement low-cost or subsidized training programs for operators of childcare facilities to improve care quality and safety in informal childcare centers.



- Implement incentives (e.g., grants, access to public resources) for informal childcare centers that commit to quality improvement benchmarks.



- Pursue public-private partnerships and community-based models to upgrade facilities or build new ones where informal facilities dominate.



- Implement targeted subsidies or vouchers for low-income families to access childcare services, reducing the financial pressure that leads them to informal options.



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