

Security, Community Organization and Privatization of Public Space: An analysis of gated neighbourhoods in Nairobi, Kenya

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Paper Presented at the International Workshop on “Privatization of Security in sub-Saharan African cities: Urban Dynamics and New Forms of Governance”
Ibadan, Nigeria, November 21-25, 2005

Abstract

Controlling access and gating is perhaps the only way most residents of Nairobi, Kenya, continue to fight crime in their neighbourhoods. This is mainly facilitated through a residents or a neighbourhood association who decide to control access to their neighbourhood by having one or two security points. Based on an empirical study of three regions in Nairobi, the aim of this paper is to (1) provide an overview of neighbourhood associations in Nairobi and their organizational structures; (2) explain the reasons behind their formation as well as that of privatizing public space; (3) examine the security measures they employ; and (4) analyze the types of control these neighbourhoods have, their role in promoting territorialism, segregation, inclusion and exclusion, and their impact on mobility and planning of the city.

Introduction

The results presented in this paper are based on a survey of gated communities in Nairobi. The survey covered three distinct regions of Nairobi. These are Eastlands, Westlands and Southlands. The three areas adequately represent the various types of community protections in public spaces and also the different socio-economic and environmental status in Nairobi. It should be noted that Nairobi is many ways an archetype of the African colonial city, having purely colonial origins, which shaped its structure and management at the time of Kenya’s transition to independence. The different residential locations in Nairobi still depict the racial segregation brought about by the spatial organization in the early stages of the development of the city.

All the associations surveyed have experienced crime within their area of operation, most of them being petty crimes of stealing clothes from the drying lanes, house break-ins to steal household goods (mainly the electronics), mugging (commonly known as *kupigwa ngeta*), snatching of mobile phones, drug abuse within the estate, stealing of batteries and radio cassettes from parked vehicles, and car-jackings in front of one’s gate. Some of the crimes are common during the day while others occur at night. For example, house break-ins occur during the day while car jacking, armed robbery and violent crimes are common at night. In case of a crime in the neighbourhood, the police are normally informed accordingly and as a formality.²

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² The officials or the guards are the ones who report crime cases to the police. It is in very rare cases that the victims report to the police.

Neighbourhood associations and their organizational structures

Formation of residents' neighbourhood associations is not a recent phenomenon in Kenya.³ Their emergence in some residential estates is as old as the residential estates themselves whereas in other places it is a process, taking place as the concept of community policing becomes popular and also as lack of confidence in the government machinery (mainly the police) to fight crime in the neighbourhoods continues to increase.

The neighbourhood associations in Nairobi have all sorts of names, most of them reflecting the reasons behind their formation: residents associations, security associations, neighbourhood associations, welfare associations, security and social services associations and welfare development associations. Apparently, the number of houses covered is not a factor considered before an association is formed. The number of houses covered by the associations ranged from 17–300.

Table 1 presents the organizational structure of the residents' neighbourhood associations. A third of the associations were formed over 10 years ago, two-fifths during the 1990s and a quarter between the year 2000 and 2002⁴, partly confirming that the formation of neighbourhood associations is not a recent phenomenon. A large majority (84%) of the neighbourhood associations are not formally registered. Formal registration⁵ is a recent development, as the need for recognition becomes an important component in them. Registration is also a way to establish (formal) collaboration with the police and the local authority.

Even though many of the neighbourhood associations are not registered, they internally "formalize" their activities through democratic practices of having office bearers (usually the chairperson, secretary and treasurer). About half of the associations hold elections to determine their officials, 35% propose⁶ their officials while another 16% get their officials through volunteering.

It is a common occurrence to find both tenants and house owners in all the residential estates of Nairobi, except for the city council (tenant) housing estates where all the residents are supposed to be tenants. Even then, the proportion of tenants is normally higher than those of house owners. In more than two-thirds of the associations, membership⁷ is automatic as soon as one becomes a resident.

³ Nairobians have always organized themselves (spatially) for a common cause (tribal, welfare, women's organizations, merry-go-rounds, security, etc).

⁴ Seven chairpersons could not tell when their associations were formed because they were recent residents in their neighbourhoods.

⁵ It was not clear under what ministry or government arm the registration takes place.

⁶ The proposals are usually done during a general meeting. More often than not, the persons proposed are the residents who initiated the idea, residents with connection with the police and/or have some influence to help the association.

⁷ Membership to an association is by household where the household and/or spouse represent that particular household in all the meetings. All the contributions and payments are also done per household.

However, in a few instances membership is voluntary to accommodate those who refuse to cooperate. Less than 10% of the associations have encouraged formal registration of membership to show their commitment to being members. Formal registration to be a member of a neighbourhood association is done through the payment of a membership fee (once or yearly), i.e. besides the money remitted to pay for security and other services.

Table 1: Organizational structure of the neighbourhood associations

	%
Year of forming the association (n=30; %=100)	
Before 1990	30.0
1990-1999	43.3
2000-2002	26.7
Status of the association (n= 37; %=100)	
Registered	16.2
Not registered	83.8
How the officials get their positions (n= 37; %=100)	
Through elections	48.6
By being proposed	35.1
By volunteering	16.2
Composition of members (n= 37; %=100)	
Majority are tenants	56.8
Majority are house owners	43.2
How does one become a member? (n= 37; %=100)	
Voluntarily	21.6
Formal registration	8.1
Automatically	70.3
Attendance rate in regular meetings (n= 34; %=100)	
Over 75% of members	17.6
Between 51-75%	47.1
Between 25-50%	23.5
Less than 25%	11.8

All the associations, except three, hold both regular executive and general meetings to discuss, amongst others, security related matters. The frequencies of these meetings depend on the organizational structure of individual associations. However, over half of the associations conceded holding their meetings any time as security matter arises. It is within the framework of these meetings that matters relating to (in)security are discussed and resolutions passed for implementation. The attendance to these meetings is very encouraging. About two-thirds of the associations normally record an attendance of at least half of the members every time a meeting is called. This is an indication of the residents' commitment towards addressing matters that affect them.

Even as neighbourhood associations strive to effectively serve their members, they are faced with a number problems. Some of the main problems facing these associations are:

- Non-payment or late payment of the monthly contribution by some members, making it quite difficult to pay the security guards.
- Some members do not adhere to the laid down rules and regulations.
- Some members never attend meetings yet they are the first to criticize the resolutions passed.
- Some members are arrogant.
- Some officials are not committed to their duties.

While affiliation is not mandatory, half of the associations are affiliated to a larger welfare or neighbourhood association. Affiliation enhances collective bargaining on matters affecting the neighbourhood as noted by one of the chairmen below:

“We do have an umbrella welfare association for the entire estate. The umbrella welfare association, in which I am also the chairman, is meant to guard against land grabbing by taking legal actions against the culprits and also to address security matters in the entire estate. The umbrella welfare association plans to put up a police post, one main gate and a fence around the entire estate. We also work very closely with the police.”

The police and the local authority recognize these umbrella associations more than the smaller ones. In case of a major security or welfare issue, a meeting is called of all the residents. Otherwise, officials of the individual associations meet regularly to discuss and implement security and welfare matters on behalf of their members. The following umbrella associations were identified in the three regions of Nairobi:

- Buruburu Residents Welfare Association – for the various associations by courts in Buruburu Estate Phase 1 to Phase 5.
- Kimathi Estate Welfare Association – for the various associations by courts in Kimathi Estate.
- WE CAN DO IT
- Ayany Estate Security Association – for the various associations by courts in Ayany estate.
- Greater Golf Course Welfare Association – for the various associations by courts in Golf Course Estate.
- Lavington Residents Association – for the various associations in Lavington area.

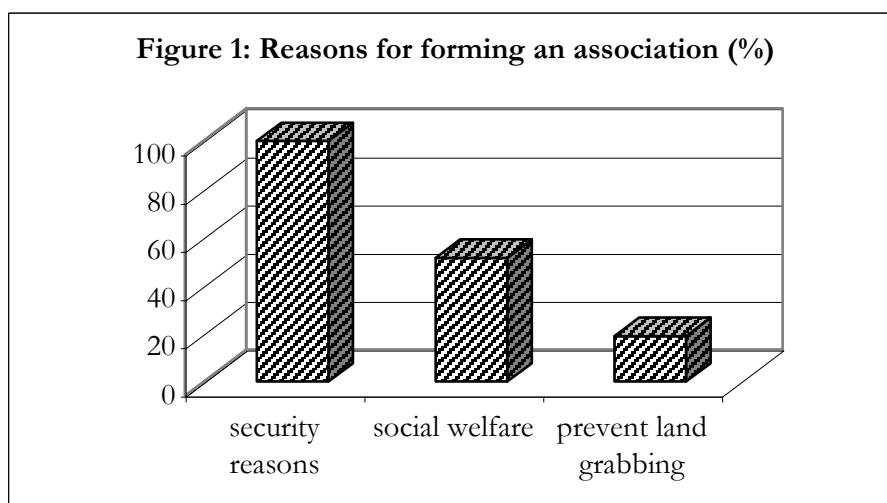
As concerns cooperation with the police and the local authority, there is still need to strengthen the cooperation between the police and the residents to go beyond merely reporting crime cases to them. The initiative by some of the associations to hold regular meetings with the police (22%) and to seek support from them (39%) is a step forward in this direction. The police response to crime is still poorly rated as about half (54%) of the associations reported that their response is extremely slow and not helpful at all. On the other hand, police patrol should be enhanced in the neighbourhoods as only one fifth of them reported frequent police patrols. Despite that poor rating, a quarter of the associations reported that the police have been very quick and helpful in responding to crime occurring in their neighbourhoods.

The cooperation with the local authority is even wanting. More than half (61%) of the associations reported having no linkage at all with the local authority. The local authority is supposed to repair the streetlights, potholed roads and clear the roadsides of thickets and bushes. These services are only provided in a few neighbourhoods (25%) who have developed good working relations with the local authority. It is interesting to note that most of the associations do not even bother to seek approval of the local authority before they privatise space (erecting gates/barriers).

Reasons of forming a neighbourhood association

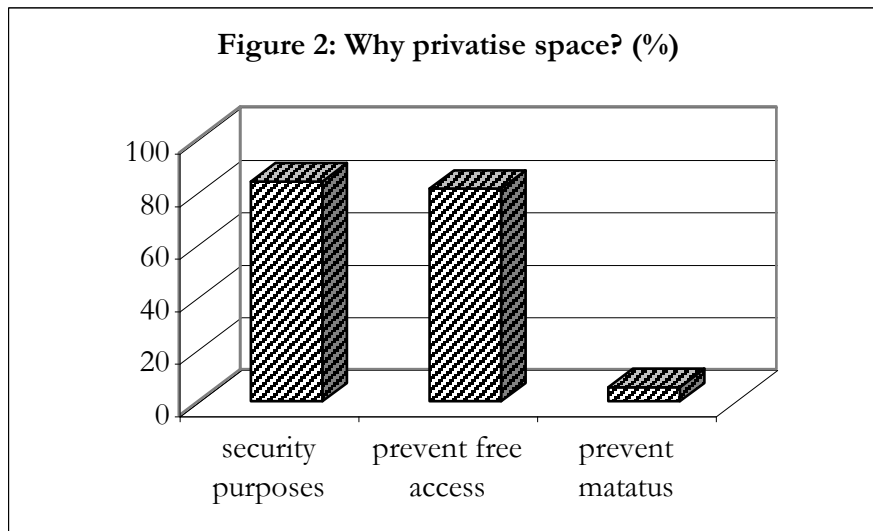
Figure 1 confirms the hypothesis that neighbourhood associations are formed mainly because of security reasons. All the associations sampled were formed to address, amongst other things, insecurity in and around the neighbourhood. Half (51%) of them are also embracing social issues of mutual concern while another one fifth (19%) were formed to prevent land grabbing, mainly of the public open spaces.

The motivation (i.e. how the association was formed) was also security related. Nine out of every ten associations (92%) were formed after insecurity related experience within the neighbourhood. It is sometimes very difficult at the initial stages to get the general consensus of all the members, but at least it needs mobilization of a few members: half (51%) of the associations were formed through mobilization of a few members, most probably after a security related experience. Only one association was formed through inspiration from another association, without experiencing a crime. This indicates lack of enthusiasm to form an association before actually experiencing a crime in the estate or in neighbouring estate.



Why privatize space?

To answer this question, the chairpersons of the neighbourhood associations were asked why they decided to have a common gate or gates of entry and exit. Figure 2 clearly shows that the decision to privatize space is obviously security related. A large majority of the associations (84%) decided to have one entry and exit point to monitor all persons coming in and out of the court. Other access gates are normally closed or their usage restricted.



Equally important is the need to prevent free access through the court or estate. The intra-estate roads are public spaces and are meant to provide free and convenient access not only within the estate but also between the courts and estates. This means that the public, regardless of where one comes from, could use the roads. More often than not the roads provide a short cut to pedestrians moving from one point to another. The roads eventually become busy corridors and throughways of human traffic, some of who engaged in criminal activities within the courts. To prevent this, many of the courts (81%) decided to block the throughways within the estate. For example, there are hardly any throughways between the courts in Buruburu estate. One of the chairpersons explains further:

“The association was started in the 1980s. Before the association was formed this area used to be open with no perimeter fence. It was easy for anybody to enter here from any point. Also the human traffic to industrial area was passing through this place, making it very dirty. Our safety was also at stake and there was a lot of petty theft like stealing clothes from the lines.”

The *matatu*⁸ menace was evident in Umoja 1 and Tena estates. To avoid the morning and evening traffic jams characteristic of the Outer Ring Road the *matatus* turned the within estate roads into throughways to Umoja 2, Komarock and Kayole. Two barriers were erected in Tena to prevent this. According to the residents, *matatus* cause several accidents within the estate, they play loud music and during the dry season, the dust becomes evidently unbearable. A couple of these barriers and gates have been abandoned indicating defiance from the *matatu* operators. They physically break the gates to force their way through. They do this frequently so that the residents can no longer bear the costs of repairs every now and then.

Ideally, all the members are expected to contribute equally towards the costs of constructing the gates, barriers or blocking other entry/exit points. Not all the associations have managed this. However, it is encouraging to note that in over two-

⁸ Commuter taxis.

thirds (68%) of the associations members shared the costs equally. Another 32% received contributions from willing members only. Safaricom mobile phone service providers sponsored two gates and guardhouses in Jericho.

When asked later “In what way have the common gates and barriers helped to curb crime in this neighbourhood?” almost all of them (92%) indicated that they had witnessed a decrease in crime. Three of the neighbourhoods have not experienced any crime since then.

Security measures

To enhance security within the neighbourhoods several security measures are put in place. One common measure is hiring of security personnel to man the security points (gates/barriers). A large majority of the associations prefer locally hired security guards who are relatively cheaper to negotiate with than the guards hired from private firms (Table 2).

The number of security guards depends on the internal security arrangements of the courts and also the ability of the residents to pay for the (extra) services. Over three quarters of the associations have controlled access at their security points: that is, having both day and night security personnel (Table 2).

Table 2: Security measures

	%
Security personnel hired from: (n=30; %=100)	
Locally hired	70.3
Hired from private firm	29.3
Security personnel (n=30; %=100)	
At night only	24.3
Both day and night	75.7
How the security personnel paid (n= 37; %=100)	
Equal monthly contribution through the treasurer	75.7
The guard collects money personally from each house	21.6
Security firm bills each house	2.7
Who are security personnel answerable to? (n= 37; =100)	
The officials	73.0
The (employing) private firm	16.2
A security committee	10.8

Just like with the construction of gates and barriers, the residents have to share the costs of paying for the services rendered by the guards. In three quarters of the associations, the treasurer pays the guard(s) through monthly contributions from the residents and in a few cases the guards collect the money directly from the residents. Apart from where the guards are hired from a private firm, they are answerable to the officials or a special security committee within the court. In some neighbourhoods, members with vehicles are charged an extra fee.

Security points

A total of 345 security point locations were identified in the three regions. Seventy three percent of them were located in Eastlands, 20% in Southlands and 7% in Westlands. The high numbers of security points signal the rising levels of both crime and insecurity in Nairobi. Over half of the security point locations in Eastlands were concentrated in Buruburu, an expansive middle-income residential neighbourhood while those in Westlands were concentrated in the high-income areas of Bernard (Lavington), Thompson and Mountain View. In Southlands, about half of the security points were concentrated in the middle (to low)-income estates of Ayany and Olympic, bordering Kibera slums.

There were no security point locations in the informal settlements of Kawangware and Kangemi in Westlands and Kibera's Fort Jesus and Laini Saba in Southlands. The Mountain View residents erected a security point (barrier) at the border of Kawangware and Mountain View to spatially separate the two contrasting neighbourhoods. In Eastlands, security points were not observed in the low-income estates of Makadara, Ofafa Maringo and Bahati. In Kibera, the residents mainly depend on vigilante groups to facilitate their safety. These groups ensure that security is availed to the residents who in exchange give out a small cash token as appreciation.

Residents of Kawangware, Ofafa Maringo and Bahati denied having such groups and insisted on getting security from the Chief's camp, police patrols and/or through individual arrangements of securing one's house. For example, in Ofafa Maringo and Bahati, many households have used iron sheets to secure their compounds. Likewise, high-income neighbourhoods of Amboseli and Kilimani in Westlands that had no security point locations depend largely on the private security arrangement by each household.

The high-income neighbourhoods of Kimathi (Eastlands), Bernard/Lavington, Thompson, Mountain View (Westlands) and Woodley (Southlands) tend to privatise the main streets that lead in and out of the estate. Apart from Kimathi, the barriers and/or gates are controlled 24 hours a day by private security guards with alarm back-ups and mobile security vehicles. Even with this, each individual household still employs all sorts of security measures around his/her house – a private guard to man the gate, wall fencing, security alarms, etc.

There is, seemingly, in Westlands and Southlands, a relationship between environmental area type and the concentration of security points. No security points were observed in the poorly maintained environmental areas of Westlands and Southlands. These are the informal settlements of Kawangware and Kibera mentioned above. While the security points in Westlands are concentrated in the well-maintained environmental areas, those in Southlands are mainly found within the fairly maintained areas. The same cannot be said of Eastlands since security points can be easily identified in all the three types of environment. However, the western part of Eastlands, which is poorly maintained, is also devoid of security points.

Access type at the security point location

It is evident from Table 3 that controlled access points dominate not only in Nairobi but also across the regions. In Eastlands they account for 41% of all the security points in that region, Southlands 47% and in Westlands 63%. Many neighbourhoods prefer having both day and night security personnel to man their gates. In case of a visitor, the guards have to inquire and register his or her entry into the court. Strangers with no business in the court are definitely denied entry.

Completely closed security points are common in Eastlands. All the closed security points (13) were observed in Eastlands. This is because many neighbourhoods in this region have decided to have only one entry and exit point. All other access points are permanently closed (for both pedestrians and vehicles) to prevent free access through the estate.

Tena and Umoja 1 estates had the highest number of permanently closed security points because of robbery, thugs, pedestrians and *matatu* menace. Most of the gates are permanently closed so that only one entrance is functional. This prevents free access through the estate by pedestrians and *matatus* from the adjacent Kayole and Umoja 2 estates. It is also a way of minimizing the rapidly increasing house break-ins and car jacking incidences.

Table 3: Access type at the security point location⁹

	Eastlands		Southlands		Westlands		Nairobi	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No control	15	5.9	4	5.9	2	8.3	21	6.1
Temporary open	74	29.2	16	23.5	6	25.0	96	27.8
Controlled access	104	41.1	32	47.1	15	62.5	151	43.8
Restricted access	47	18.6	16	23.5	1	4.2	64	18.6
Completely closed	13	5.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	13	3.8
Total	253	100.0	68	100.0	24	100.0	345	100.0

Abandoned security points (with no control) were again common in Eastlands and specifically in Tena and Umoja 1 estates. This is an indication of the difficulty the residents experience when they organize themselves in space for security reasons. Because of the high rate of intra- and inter-residential mobility of tenants in Eastlands, many of them are not enthusiastic to contribute towards the construction of gates and employment of security guards. The strength and activeness of the association seem to be determined by the permanence of stay and cooperation of the residents.

Being tenants, they leave the responsibility to the landlords. The landlords on the other hand refuse to take up the challenge claiming that it is the responsibility of the tenants to provide themselves with security. The landlords are not bothered because they do not otherwise stay within the neighbourhood.

⁹ That is access type at the security point as observed at the time of survey.

Restricted security points were not a common feature in Westlands – where security guards control almost all the security points. In Eastlands, restricted security points are common in Tena and Umoja 1 estates or around estates bordering low-income neighbourhoods. The same applies to Southlands where restricted security points were observed in Olympic and Ayany, estates bordered by the Kibera slums.

Impact of gated communities

As much as neighbourhood associations provide security to their members, they have in a way encouraged territorialism, segregation and exclusion. The traditional social life characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s has all been stunted now. Residents and their children hardly know any other persons beyond their gates. Furthermore, one needs not to go far for services. Almost all the services have been “privatized” and are supplied by or through the gated communities. Another problem highlighted in the media recently is that gated communities pose a problem for emergency services such as ambulances. In addition, other road users are inconvenienced because they are forced to use alternative routes which might be longer or unsafe. Besides the physical impact, gated communities challenge the spatial, organizational and institutional order that has shaped some cities. Lastly, the rising number of gated communities by residents indicates that security fears will in future be a major factor influencing cities’ urban and residential property development.

Conclusion

It is clearly evident that many security points coming up signal the rising levels of both crime and insecurity. Privatization of space through the resident’s neighbourhood association is one way the residents of Nairobi organize themselves to fight against insecurity – perceived or real. Whereas every resident has a right to safeguard their person and property, the right to freedom of movement should be respected as well.