



Facilitating Inclusive and Improved Disaster Management in Urban Informal Settlements

Mathare Legal Aid & Human Rights Advocacy (MLAHRA)

is a community-based organization that works in the Mathare informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. It promotes the well-being of women and youth by supporting their participation in community forums, decision-making bodies and capacity building efforts, and empowers them to play a leading role in advocating for sustainable and inclusive urban development.

AREA AND SCOPE

Mathare Legal Aid & Human Rights Advocacy (MLAHRA) works in the Mathare informal settlement as well as other informal settlements in the Nairobi area.

The organization has worked with

7.000 COMMUNITY MEMBERS

since it became active in 2007



CONTEXT

Mathare is an inner-city slum located in the Mathare Valley in the center of Nairobi. It hosts an estimated half a million people who largely live in informally built structures and on informally owned land, with very limited access to services and infrastructure.



Large parts of the slum are flooded in the event of heavy rains and storms due to their location along the Mathare river, the density of buildings, which seal the valley's natural soil, and poor waste management practices, which clog drainage infrastructure. Mathare is also frequently affected by fires, mostly triggered by unsupervised open-fire cooking or by arsonists aiming to free land for further construction and development. Climate change compounds these urban risks by creating conditions for both a drier and hotter local climate as well as more frequent and intense heavy rain events.

These small-scale but frequent hazards recurrently affect and displace tens, if not hundreds, of households. Displacement remains primarily short-term and short distance, with people typically tending to seek shelter in safer locations within the slum, including community halls, schools and churches, for a few days. This is often accompanied by the loss of all assets and savings, of all housing construction materials and, in some cases, household eviction, as land is reclaimed by lawful owners or new settlers.

Repeated cycles of disasters and displacement hinder the durable improvement of living conditions in Mathare and exacerbate existing inequalities, disproportionately

impacting individuals and groups in vulnerable situations, including women. Many women in Mathare are already marginalized and stigmatized, having been blamed for the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in their rural communities and subsequently expelled. Likewise, women in Mathare often face a heightened risk of gender-based violence (GBV), including within the family, and early pregnancy, which undermines their future educational and professional prospects.

RESPONSES

MLAHRA seeks to support women and youth in informal settlements by enhancing their participation in local decision-making bodies, empowering them to advocate for their communities' needs and engage government representatives, and building their capacity to support their neighbors before, during and after disasters.

Risk Mapping

MLAHRA trains women and youth community members to conduct risk and impact mapping exercises. This entails surveying the community and assessing a range of factors including household-level flood and fire risk, the presence of individuals with limited mobility or on medication for chronic conditions (such as waterborne diseases, TB or HIV/AIDS), and the production and disposal of waste.

“*The message I usually tell people who are prone to a lot of disasters or displacement is that you need to be prepared, not wait for help to come from outside. You need to prepare the community, prepare yourself to be the first responder.*”

Ann Mbuthia

These mapping efforts take place on a regular basis, including in the post-disaster context to understand the impacts suffered and the needs of affected and displaced individuals. The resulting information is then used to design more inclusive and adapted disaster management and resilience interventions.

Risk Preparedness

MLAHRA promotes community awareness around flood and fire risks, specifically targeting women, youth and children as they are traditionally overlooked in community plans and responses. As a result of these efforts, trained individuals now act as first responders, investigating fires whenever they see smoke, responding when possible by containing fires and rescuing trapped neighbors, and warning authorities as well as disseminating alerts within the community.



The organization also strives to support sustainable livelihoods to address risk drivers. For example, in partnership with both the national and county governments, MLAHRA supports a women's cooperative that rehabilitates and manages a public toilet and water point, providing public services in exchange for a small fee. The organization further supports youth-led initiatives including door-to-door garbage collection and disposal in safe locations as well as women-led table banking schemes that enable community members to obtain small loans.

Displacement Response

MLAHRA supports local responses to displacement by fundraising for reconstruction and sourcing building materials as well as promoting local solidarity mechanisms whereby fellow community members host displaced persons after the occurrence of a disaster. The organization further encourages the participation of disaster-affected persons in cooperatives and small-loan schemes that enable them to access funds to rebuild their homes and prevent eviction as others claim their land in their absence. Similarly, MLAHRA supports women's cooperatives to save and legally acquire land in safer locations to allow their members to relocate to formal and more permanent structures.

CHALLENGES

The informal nature of tenure and housing in Mathare poses a significant challenge in the context of disasters as it impedes slum dwellers from receiving compensation for the losses they incur. Lack of compensation also constitutes a key reason why the local population opposes infrastructure development including housing construction or the improvement of roads and drainage systems, as they recognize that this would lead to unaddressed displacement. As a result, structural conditions within the community and access to the area remain challenging, with major consequences for disaster response efforts.

The government has recently established that demolitions cannot take place if people are not provided with a viable alternative for dignified relocation. Despite this, safer housing options such as formally owned homes are usually unaffordable for the most vulnerable members of the community. Thus, even where safer options have been identified, community members continue to look for inexpensive land and thereby continue to live in hazardous areas. This results in a vicious cycle that perpetuates risk.



RESULTS

MLAHRA's work has improved communities' disaster preparedness and response capacities, with many of its members able to lead early warning, search and rescue, and early response efforts. As a result, the community is less reliant on external disaster responders.

MLAHRA's activities have significantly improved the well-being of women and youth in the community. For example, the organization has increased women's participation in local community open forums and decision-making committees, including disaster committees. As a result, women are more actively engaged in the allocation of relief and reconstruction assistance after disasters. Moreover, the organization's support to women and youth has enabled an increasing number of women to start small businesses and support themselves. These initiatives have also had important implications at the household level, including a reported reduction in GBV and domestic violence cases.

After a disaster, the community utilizes a **TABLE BANKING SYSTEM** where members can borrow money to rebuild their houses

Photos: © MLAHRA

The PDD implements the project to “Avert, Minimize and Address Displacement Related to the Effects of Climate Change” (PAMAD) to assist countries and communities facing the challenges of Loss and Damage and Displacement. Under PAMAD, and in partnership with the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations on Disaster Reduction (GNDR), the PDD promotes peer-to-peer learning on effective responses to displacement and climate change in Kenya. The project is supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). For more information, visit <https://pamad.disasterdisplacement.org>



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