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JOBLESS IN NAIROBI *

By

Chelagat Mutai

They are young, early teens to thirty years old. They are dressed in worn trousers and fading shirts. The shoes have many patches. Mostly they are undernourished. Some have been in Nairobi for years; others are recent arrivals. Normally it is easy to detect the more experienced ones, they are leaner and look more grim. The ones that have just moved in from a rural area are still sleeker, still full of hope. It does not take them long though, before disillusion pervades their minds and makes them a shuffling, disjointed, shabby lot with blood-shot eyes and a strong odour that comes from the unwashed clothes, stinking shoes, unbrushed teeth.

Their number all over the country may be as high as 100,000 - young people desperately searching for a means to support themselves. Job seekers congregate outside the labour offices, the most crowded one in Nairobi is the one at the Industrial Centre. They stand outside the gates at the factory, they move from office to office and even through private homes, inquiring and pleading.

The ones I talked to were young people from different parts of the country. They come from Kisumu, Nyeri, Kiambu, Coast Province, Rift Valley, hoping to find a job in Nairobi after CPE or High School Certificate. At first they look for clerical jobs which they all prefer without exception, as they have no technical skills or training of any kind whatsoever. Soon they realize that only a tiny fraction will get jobs in the white collar areas and they lower their sights, so that in the end they are willing to be labourers, mechanics, factory hands, houseboys, messengers; or hired hands in such informal trading like kiosks, streetside barbers, maize roasting, bar waiters.

They eventually, if they do not give up and go home, learn to live in squalid conditions in the slum or semi-slum areas. Their part-time jobs afford no real relief, because they are at them for long hours with very little remuneration. These petty enterprises never make any of them prosperous, and soon the lure of money that they see everybody else making around them makes them move irrevocably into crime. They steal from institutions like banks in bands, or simply way-lay people

*This is a reprint from *Viva*, 1979 (July), a monthly magazine published in Nairobi, Kenya.

at night. The story of a youth who had gone to the city to look for a job not infrequently ends in the jail.

When I talked to these young men who at 8 a.m. had already formed two queues in the labour office, they told me that to live in Nairobi one had to have someone to shelter them at least. Food was not automatically provided. Some lived on one meal of *sukuma* and *ugali* a day. In the wayside kiosks a measure of the popular *githeri* (maize and beans) is 14 cents, regarded by most job-seekers as the minimum amount one has to spend in order to live from day to day. One young man told me that he survived on a cup of tea and *mandazi* (donut) provided by his brother-in-law.

They expect to get a job which pays at least \$40 - but many are willing to settle for less.

"Provided I can get a place to stay in Mathare and money for food, just simple *sukuma* and *ugali*, I would be willing to work for even \$25," one told me. In fact wages in bars, for *matatu* boys, or assistants in kiosks are often less than \$25. You can see by the way they dress that they are really in a bind, as all they can do is to live from day to day.

Rents in Mathare, Shauri Moyo and other semi-slum areas, without conveniences of any kind range from \$4 to \$12. The rents are often payable four months in advance.

I remember a suffocating experience I had recently when I entered a house in Pumwani, mud floors, walls and rusted corrugated iron sheets on the roof. It was divided into rabbit-cubicles with tiny windows and a bed virtually filled the whole space. It was not only the smallness, but the fact that pollution in the form of dust and rotting garbage on the paths outside contributed to making a nightmare. And yet it costs \$5 to rent such a room.

The job seekers I talked to could not afford to buy shoes, a change of clothes, soap, toothpaste, could not ride in buses but had to walk from Kariobangi or wherever they stay to town. If a relative gave them money they would go to the open air markets in Eastlands to look for second-hand clothes. They often cannot afford water for a bath, and many say they wash when they can, which can be once a month!

Many of the job-seekers soon adjust their aspirations to the realities at hand. Even Form Four leavers are now willing to take manual jobs hoping that they can later on move to the skilled professions.

Some finally give up after relatives have made clear

that they cannot be supported any more and go back to the rural areas where a few work on their family plots or get manual jobs at road-building sites, farms or trading centres. And some do neither of these, but lead an idle life, sometimes taking part-time manual work just in order to afford to drink the local brew. Many very able-bodied young men then disintegrate with drink and instability.

What about the girls? There are also many girls flocking to Nairobi, especially from areas adjacent to the city, after CPE and High School Certificate to look for work. They too stay with relatives, but in many cases co-habit with working men who have lured them to the city promising them jobs which do not exist. They make these girls their unofficial wives and many end up pregnant and rejected by the same suitors.

Form four school leavers among girls can still be absorbed into teaching, nursing or secretarial and office jobs. Many work in the countryside as nursery school teachers, untrained teachers or just help their mothers with household chores. Those with only CPE certificates have to be content with joining the increasing numbers in the bars, households as domestics, or resort finally to prostitution under the patronship of bar and lodging owners.

Job-hunting for a girl, especially a young good-looking one can be a nightmare. Bosses, with few exceptions, want a date after 4:30 p.m. so that the discussions may go "well." Even if a girl succumbs, it may turn out that the promised job did not exist anyway in the first place.

Many girls see prostitution as the only way out. "When you are employed as a house girl, the treatment, leave alone the meagre salary, will drive you out of there in no time. And where can one stay in Nairobi without money? I just find I have to solicit men in the drinking places. It is not that one can make much money, but at least one can survive," one girl told me.

The story of the unemployed is a very sad one indeed, and it is a problem that is growing all the time. The consciences of the affluent in the society should move them to do something for these victims of circumstances in our midst.

Julius Muryao Mbatha, a young *Kamba* of 26 came to Nairobi in 1977 to stay with an uncle who is employed by the City Council. He did not go beyond Std. 5, because when his father died, his mother could not support the five children. Their home area, Kamueni, is one of the driest parts of *Ukambani* and the earth hardly yields any crops.

So to break away from this he decided to come to Nairobi to look for a job. Since he came he has regularly presented himself to employers in the industrial area, in town, everywhere; but his standard of education has militated against his being considered for even a manual job.

Now he is desperate. "I hardly eat enough. My uncle can only afford *sukuma* and *githeri* and this only in the evening. I eat no breakfast and no lunch. I have no pocket money, no clothes and can hardly afford to have a bath, water being 3 cents a *debe*. I am ready to do anything even housework."

He cannot go back home because his mother and brothers and sisters are living in poverty and as the eldest son he is expected to support them.

Jackton Simba is an old man of about 50, who supports himself by repairing shoes. He started his own shoe repairing business in 1967 after working for someone else in Mathare since 1964.

He came all the way from Nyanza where he found he could not survive on a small plot of land, as also he had been struck by illness and was not strong enough for heavy labour.

"Life is very difficult. As you can see, we are forced to live in this area; if one had money of course this is the last place to be. But what can I do? I have no education and my health is not good, it seems as if I am fated for this." He did not go beyond Std. IV and does not see his prospects in life brightening at all.

He is married with four children, two of whom attend school in Mathare. He barely manages to meet expenses of food, clothes, school fees.

And of course the shack he lives in, something like 4 feet by 3 feet has to be paid for. The rent is \$15 a month!

James Otieno and several others have banded together and now run a carpentry shop where they make a variety of household things like tables, chairs, cupboards - on a small scale of course. The finished products are unrefined but passable, the kind of product a Mathare man can afford.

Otieno left school at Form II. Only 22, he dropped out because he lacked school fees. He says that he was trained

in carpentry by a friend in Maringo after which he looked for young men like himself to start a business with. But this was not before he had walked the streets looking for a job.

"After one year, the distant relative that had agreed to accomodate me could not take it any more, so he turned me out. I had to apprentice myself to this carpenter in Maringo after which I decided to go it alone." He says there is not enough money to go round all the partners but at least it is better than starving. He does not see any prospects at all of prosperity, unless help comes from the government.

"If the government could help us people who are struggling to make an honest living we would be happy. We could build decent workshops and buy good tools and materials."

Dressed in the *Akorino* turban and ankle length skirt, Muthoni wa Kamau insisted that there were some people who needed urgent help from the government, people who could not support themselves. But she feels that she is relatively prosperous because she has a shop selling old and new clothes and household utensils. It is a small place but it is comparatively neat and indeed she looks prosperous herself.

Asked how she started, she could only say that God helped her. She runs the business with her husband. She has four children, two of which are in school. Originally she came from Muranga.

She says that life is difficult trying to make ends meet in Nairobi, especially if one was a woman, because in her view there are a limited number of self-help jobs a woman can do without committing a crime.

"You will see a woman resorting to prostitution, the bars or the preparations of *chang'aa*, all of which lead to prison. As a Christian it is all very regrettable to me."

Charles Mutiso is unemployed, so he lives with his brother who is a garage hand. He failed his CPE examination, so he decided to try Nairobi for a job. He came two years ago and up to now still walks the streets regularly looking for something.

"I don't want to give up, because after all I must live with hope, but in the meantime it is uncomfortable having to ask for money from my brother who has his own family to look

after."

The regular food there, is *githeri* and *sikuma wiki* once a day. Meat is unknown - plus other things people who are affluent think they cannot do without: eggs, milk, fresh vegetables, fruits, sugar, coffee, tea.

Mutiso says that he has learned to do without those things for the time being.

Sarah Ndela Mutua, a young girl of 20 who already looks 30 because of worry, tries to survive by selling chicken which she transports from Machakos to Nairobi regularly by bus. She says this job is difficult and the returns unpredictable, the journeys being tiring and seemingly endless. She at first tried looking for a job but all she could get was housework. But she did not get on with her employer whom she claims harassed, overworked and seldom paid her.

"It is better to be a prostitute than a housegirl," she says.

*An Interview With
Labour Commissioner Mutugi*

When I spoke to Mr. J.M. Mutugi, the Labour Commissioner, he pointed out that his ministry was energetically trying to solve the problem of unemployment and underemployment as an ongoing thing and had three main departments to deal with job-allocation and job-creation.

According to Mr. Mutugi the greatest problem is not unemployment but poverty. "Many people work long hours in the informal sector: open air garages, as shoe shiners, barbers, maize roasters, kiosk owners, and these people offer very valuable services at a reasonable price to the not so affluent majority in Nairobi. At least they are occupied with legal business and are not in crime. But the problem is their remuneration. They remain very poor," Mr. Mutugi says.

It is not only in the urban areas that poverty is prevalent. The majority of people in the countryside are poor, especially the landless, and this group is increasing in areas like Kiambu, Taita, Kakamega, Kisii, Nyanza and parts of Rift Valley.

"In development programmes, the government sees it as its duty to ensure the basic needs of the people, food, shelter, clothing and welfare services. This means injecting money into

rural areas for roads, agricultural development in tea and coffee; but we have realized that the need to grow more food had been given less prominence. To this end all activities, be they cash crop production or food production will be actively encouraged by the government," Mr. Mutugi said.

Mr. Mutugi said that in his opinion there were two problems connected with young school leavers, the fact that they shun the countryside and also their unwillingness to enter jobs at the lowest levels.

"I feel very strongly that the young men in rural areas spend their time in idle pastimes, just drinking and refusing to work with their hands. If a tax was introduced for everyone in the rural areas, they would soon be forced to work," Mr. Mutugi maintains.

I asked him why he felt that such a draconian measure was necessary and he answered that in 1976 the government started a Rural Works Programme which was supposed to cover construction of bridges or any other projects approved by the District Development Committees.

"But we are unable to use this money because the unemployed are choosy and do not want to dirty their hands or go in for hard labour."

Mr. Mutugi says that there are now skilled jobs in rural areas like the maintenance of tractors, water-pumps, and increasingly the rural areas will be more attractive as the products of village polytechnics and welfare services spread. How does the government propose to deal with the reluctance of school leavers to work with their hands?

"The Gachathi Report on education proposed to deal with this problem by a system of education where children are brought up with realistic aspirations. Right from the village level, church elders, local government officials and community leaders will be encouraged to take on the job of forming the attitudes needed, and the people themselves given a say in the running of their own community. This way the child will grow up knowing that there is no stigma in building the local community and that a job in the city is not the only answer."

According to Mr. Mutugi discrimination against women is diminishing as steady improvement in their chances are made especially now that men and women have been put on an equal footing by the identity card registration process.

Herdsman, Hezbon Owiti.

