

Mukuru Recycling Centre - A Gender Evaluation.

By Kathrin Senner, January 2001

1. Introduction

Mukuru Recycling Centre (MRC) was established in 1991 with the engagement of two priests of Kariobangi Catholic Church to work for the improvement of the scavenging activities in the Dandora dumping ground through reduction of exploitation by waste dealers operating around the dumpsite. The other main component of the Mukuru Recycling Centre consisted of the rehabilitation of the scavengers.

A significant result of the project noted by this evaluation is the improvement in the development of livelihood, solidarity and tolerance among the group members and rehabilitation from alcohol and drug abuse. This result is largely due to the great work of the Kariobangi Catholic Church, the provision of technical support and waste management technologies by UNCHS (Habitat) and the willingness for change among the MRC members.

Having started with one original group (Mukuru A) today, the Mukuru Recycling Centre's activities have diversified to include composting and urban agriculture and the production of fuel briquettes, with education and training as the backbone of these activities.

This report on the Mukuru Project is confined to research on the examination of the effects of the Mukuru Recycling Centre on gender roles and the relation between women and men as well as the verification of social and economic changes for the MRC members. This report aims to give an insight into the effectiveness of this project in terms of equal participation and beneficiaries among the MRC members and consideration of the different needs and interests of men and women.

2. Location and general background

Dandora waste dumping ground is the main dumpsite for the city of Nairobi. Some 2000 people, including men, women and children, are living and working at the dumping ground. These scavengers have to face various difficulties while working at the Dandora dumpsite. In 1991, two priests of the Kariobangi Catholic Church, Father John Nobilo and Father Alex Zanotelli, established the Mukuru Project. Mukuru Recycling Centre was created to organize the inhabitants of the Korogocho slums whose lives are linked to the neighbouring Nairobi City Council (NCC) dumpsite in Dandora. The main aim of this project was to rehabilitate its members who were originally operating and living in the Dandora dumpsite, to improve their waste scavenging activities by introducing better methods that are economically viable and to cut down exploitation by waste dealers (middlemen).

UNCHS (Habitat) joined the project in 1995, providing Mukuru Recycling Centre with technical support and knowledge about waste management technologies and by now has been involved in collaboration with MRC for the past five years.

Father Alex started the first group of the Mukuru Recycling Centre in 1991 with the main objective to organize scavengers who were working in the Dandora dumping ground for rehabilitation. Father Alex's main aim for this community (later named Mukuru A) was to initiate a rehabilitation program that tries to improve the scavenging activities and reformation of its members. The main activities of this group are the collection, sorting and sales of recyclable waste like paper, plastics, bones, glass etc. The second group, Mukuru B, started its operation in 1993. Mukuru B collects waste from several commercial business buildings in Nairobi. In 1996 the Mukuru project expanded and a new composting and urban agricultural group was formed. Mbolea is dealing with the recycling of organic waste into compost and agricultural gardening. The fourth group was created in 1997 named Makaa Meupe (White Charcoal). Their activities are the recycling of waste paper and sawdust into briquettes which is used as a source of fuel. Approximately, about 50% of the MRC members are women. The only exceptions are Makaa Meupe, a group only consisting of men because of the strenuous working conditions, and Mbolea as an urban agricultural group, which consists of female members only.

3. Methodology and time schedule

This evaluation was carried out with tools such as the use of secondary data, interviews with the project implementors and a survey around the representatives of the project beneficiaries. These different tools of inquiry were combined with direct observations during field visits.

Due to the short amount of time available for this research, the report is limited to some main aspects on gender issues and relations and does not attempt to provide a comprehensive evaluation of Mukuru Recycling Centre.

4. Issues

Mukuru Recycling Centre had and still has to face several problems in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. For a better understanding of the present situation of the Mukuru Project and the progress made, it is necessary to take the situation in the dumping ground and the social and economic background of the members into consideration.

1. Situation in the Dandora dumping ground

Life and work on the Dandora dumpsite concentrates on waste scavenging and sales. The proceeds of this work are used in heavy alcoholism and glue sniffing. The life in the site is very difficult, especially for women. In the dumpsite the law 'the strongest goes first' prevails. Due to the fact that women are physically disadvantaged - in terms of strength - compared to men they only receive the 'leftovers'. In the dumpsite everybody is working individually and there exists no support or solidarity among the scavengers. That is one of the reasons why many of these scavengers become victims of exploitation by waste dealers (middlemen) during their scavenging activities in the Dandora dumping ground.

2. Social and economical background of the MRC members

Most of the scavengers are leading a delinquent life, characterized by alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution and crime, and hence prone to have neither self-esteem nor self-confidence. As Anne Wairimu, the secretary of Mbolea, describes in the interview 'we lived like animals, not like human beings. We didn't care where we were sleeping, eating expired food from the dumpsite [...]'. As mentioned above, self-confidence is actually lacking in the lives of these people living in the dumpsite. They don't have any self-value and therefore don't care about their lives, their living environment or even their family. Lucy Muthoni describes her situation before becoming a member of Mukuru Recycling Centre in the following way: 'While working in the dumpsite I didn't know who I was, how to even wash myself or how to care for my children'.

Besides those social problems, these scavengers have no financial security and constant income. For that reason, most of them can hardly afford a living in terms of paying for their housing, buying food or even sending their children to school.

5. Research Findings

The evaluation of the effects of Mukuru Recycling Centre on gender roles and the relation between women and men as well as the verification of social and economical changes for the MRC members reveal many positive aspects I will like to highlight. But besides these positive results there are nevertheless some problems that need to be mentioned.

1. Improvements and changes due to the implementation of Mukuru Recycling Centre

Regarding the social background of the MRC members it is quite amazing to see the evolution of life they have gone through. By now there is a marked difference between the members of Mukuru Recycling Centre and their counterparts in the dumpsite.

A great number (more than 50%) have changed their behavior in terms of stopping the uncontrolled consumption of alcohol, controlling their lives, earning money, renting a house, buying food etc.

Mukuru Recycling Centre creates job opportunities for women and men and provides its members with financial income. The salary is still relatively low but the work within MRC is easier and on better conditions compared to the work in the dumpsite. Within Mukuru Recycling Centre the members work collectively together, they share their ideas, support and learn from each other. Regular meetings are set up to discuss the working schedule or any problems faced. Kamati Kuu, the Central Management Committee is a unifying and regulatory organ within Mukuru Recycling Centre that constitutes representatives from each of the four groups. Things have improved for most of the members because of the solidarity and support within the group. Compared to their life in the Dandora dumping ground collective working is very helpful. Especially for women - most of them being single mothers - the solidarity within the group is important because they can assist each other with looking after their children. The members of Mbolea mentioned the advantage of their agricultural activities. While working in MRC they plant fruits and green vegetables in the garden and use the agricultural products to provide for their children. These activities allow the Mbolea members to save money for other things, e.g. sending their children to school.

The Kariobangi Catholic Church and Habitat organized and carried out various workshops and training for the members of the Mukuru Project. These workshops imparted knowledge about technical skills, e.g. the production of compost, basics in management & planning and book keeping. Many MRC members describe these courses as very helpful and especially learning within a group which they experienced to be more effective.

2. Effects on gender roles and the relation between women and men

Gender relations are defined as 'the socially constituted relations between men and women which are shaped and sanctioned by norms and values held by members of a given society'.

The implementation of Mukuru Recycling Centre has an effect on gender roles and gender relations in the way that MRC has brought the recognition of both genders in its activities. With the assistance of MRC its members gain back their self-value and based on this they can treat each other equally and with respect. Compared to the situation in the dumpsite and to the beginning of the establishment of the Mukuru Project great efforts have been made. Before the Mukuru Recycling Centre was created in 1991, men did despise women. But by now, women and men are regarded as equal participants within the community. 'Equal' in the sense that women and men are sharing the same resources (e.g. workplace, waste material), their jobs are done collectively and every member has the opportunity to maintain a leadership position. There are free elections for all leadership position and the candidate who best qualifies for a certain position, irrespectively of whether that person is a woman or a man, occupies that position.

3. Women's empowerment within Mukuru Recycling Centre

Mukuru Recycling Centre is a wide-spread branch which offers several different activities. For that reason it gives its members the opportunity to express their abilities within the Centre and to manage their own enterprise. Especially women benefit from this project because it supports empowerment. Women are facing more problems concerning the situation in the dumpsite and are therefore more disadvantaged than men.

MRC helps women to take control of their own lives and the lives of their families. The members gain the ability to take initiative, to re-enforce their capacity and to ask for their rights. Anne Wangechi represents a good example for a member of MRC who has an improved livelihood and is improving her own situation. Ms. Wangechi is partnering with a fellow MRC member (a woman) to organize and manage their own embroider enterprise - independently from the Mukuru Recycling Centre - targeting hotels in Nairobi.

The Mukuru Recycling Centre has an organizational structure that has given women the opportunity to take on leading roles. Women are gradually realizing the immense potential they have and have started to take up the challenge to assert themselves. Today, about 50% of the leadership positions of the Mukuru Project are in the hands of women. But this allocation differs from group to group. Women are well represented in the MRC groups Mbolea and Mukuru B. Mbolea consists only of female members and therefore the women are managing and organizing themselves. The production of compost and agricultural products is an opportunity which enables women to participate and benefit from this project.

Within the Central Committee, Kamati Kuu, constituted by 12 members, three of them are women. Although, this is not a representation of 50%, but at least women are represented within this committee and can look after their interests. They take part in discussions about issues concerning Mukuru Recycling Centre. Even the secretary of Kamati Kuu is a woman, Anne Wairimu (Mbolea).

By organizing the women and giving them a forum where they can learn from each other and exchange their ideas, the MRC can also expand women's role in the community of Dandora. Participation in the Centre empowers women because it gives them practical experience in decision-making. This experience helps them to take part in decision-making processes also in other areas within the community.

4. Problems and difficulties

There are several problems MRC members have to face in terms of alcoholism & drug abuse, the irregularity of financial income and the internal structure of the Mukuru Project, just to mention some of the issues the report focus on.

Mukuru Recycling Centre still hasn't solved the problem of drunkenness. For example, among the male active members of Mukuru B, only 3 of them are not drunkards and a similar situation exists within Mukuru A. Alcoholism is one main cause of the instability of the project.

The project does not guarantee sufficient work for all members as well as regular income. Members of Mukuru A, Mukuru B and Mbolea complain about this issue. Due to the fact that there is not enough work for all within the Centre many of them return to the dumpsite to earn their living. Although they go back to the site, their way of life has changed. They have an informal workplan and many of them have rehabilitated and recovered from alcohol and drug abuse therefore distinguishing them from the other scavengers on the dumpsite.

Women are a majority in Mukuru Recycling Centre but regarding Mukuru A, as the original group of this project, men are still dominant in leadership position. Most of the women in Mukuru A are old, uneducated and had to face a hard life in the dumpsite. They often don't have the skills in terms of book keeping or basic arithmetic or the knowledge of the language of communication to deal with their partners in the recycling industry as well as the self-confidence to remain in leadership positions. The only exception was Sarah Wangu, a real motivated and inventive women who was the chairwoman of Mukuru A before she sadly died in March 2000. For these reasons mentioned above, there is not an equal benefit for both gender because men are in leading positions and have more control over the proceeds and are in charge of the planning. But men in leadership position are not helpful because most of Mukuru A male members are drunkards and although they have been to school and have the knowledge needed, they are not improving the project fast enough.

The dependence on men is not a exclusive problem for the members of Mukuru A. It is a problem, women in Mukuru Recycling Centre have to face in general because most of them - compared to their male colleagues - are uneducated. Besides the Mukuru Project, women who have to work in the dumpsite have to deal with middlemen who, unfortunately are men, too. It is very difficult for women among a group of men to maintain a leading role but as mentioned before, within MRC women have the opportunity to find their space in certain groups (e.g. Mbolea or Mukuru B).

6. Conclusion

The main objective of the Mukuru Recycling Centre was to rehabilitate its members who were operating and living in the Dandora dumping ground so as to reverse the exploitation trend that was previously the norm by waste dealers and improve their waste scavenging activities by introducing technical skills. In this process, progress has been made. In terms of change of behaviour and lifestyle, about half of the MRC members improved working conditions within the Centre compared to the situation in the dumpsite, recognition and tolerance among the members as well as the empowerment of women and men.

The results of Mukuru Recycling Centre are quite satisfying but nevertheless for MRC to become sustainable and efficient, there is a need of training for its members on basic numeracy and literacy as well as leadership courses. Basic knowledge and skills for all MRC members would also ensure a more equal allocation of leadership positions between women and men and the possibility for Mukuru Recycling Centre to improve and become sustainable. At that point of time, MRC needs some sort of support. It is important for the members to know that there are people (especially from the Kariobangi Catholic Church) advising and listening to them. The goal and challenge still is that the members of Mukuru Recycling Centre gain back their dignity and confidence in themselves.

To reduce the working time in the dumpsite MRC needs to expand its activities by introducing new projects like for example soap production or plastic shredding to receive a higher proceed from sales.

Another option would be the introduction of micro credit financing. This concept would especially address the needs of the urban poor women and help them to get a low credit for e.g. to establish their own enterprise or to afford to pay for decent accommodation. But to introduce a concept like this, it is necessary that the members learn how to save money, to plan for investments in the future, to make enough profits and to maintain their enterprise.

As one member of Mbolea said: 'MRC needs to grow beyond, upon the level waiting for others to do something. For this project to grow its members have to be prepared to work hard' (Teresa Muthoni).

Although some achievements remain to be strengthened, especially those relating to the reduction of alcohol and drug abuse and the fact that there is not enough work for all MRC members available, the project is nonetheless a real success in the struggle against urban dehumanizing poverty, collapsing ecological systems and social exclusion.

References:

1. Kwach Ouma Harrison, Paumard Antoine (2000): Mukuru Recycling Centre, Report 31st July 2000.
2. Sarah Wangu Mwai: Our best practices. Mukuru Recycling Centre.
3. United Nations Centre For Human Settlements (Habitat): Women in Human Settlements Development. Getting the issue right.
4. United Nations Centre For Human Settlements (Habitat): Gendered Habitat. Working with Women and Men in Human Settlements Development. A comprehensive Policy Paper and Action Plan.