

Pulling Dandora from the dump

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NEW LEASE ON LIFE — Ephantas Ngugi grew up in Dandora, Nairobi's huge "trash dump" slum. He was headed for a wasted life until Dandora Baptist Church reached out to him. He found Christ and now is one of the church's brightest young leaders. (IMB PHOTO)

You smell it long before you see it, but you've got to see it to believe it.

The municipal dump at Dandora, just south of Nairobi proper, stretches 30 acres. Thirty acres of smoking, untreated garbage, snaking like a miniature mountain range through the public housing and shantytowns where some 600,000 people live.

2,000 tons a day

Every day, scores of ragtag trucks arrive to dump another 2,000 tons of refuse onto the stinking pile — city trash, industrial and agricultural waste, you name it. A witch's brew of chemicals, poison and pollution seep into the surrounding soil, air and water, spreading disease and dangers — particularly among Dandora's children.

The sicknesses include intestinal parasites, skin rashes, eye infections and tuberculosis. Recent tests

on 328 children and adolescents living near the dump showed 154 of them were suffering from respiratory problems.

"This is where Nairobi throws its trash," says Kenyan Baptist leader Shem Okello, standing on the edge of the dumpsite.

Scavengers

Okello watches a woman weigh plastic containers, scavenged from the pile, on a scale mounted to a makeshift wooden frame. Several thousand Dandora residents — mostly poor women — survive by selling anything of value they can find in the dump.

The city government periodically promises to close the dump, but it's still there. The scavengers and jackleg garbage haulers who make a living off it hope it stays put.



“We pray it will not go,” says the woman at the scale, bargaining with a buyer for her plastic.

They must be the only ones who want it. It’s a curse on everyone else.

Raw deal

The dump symbolizes how the more affluent precincts of Nairobi deal with places like Dandora — out of sight (or smell), out of mind.

“Around here, people get a raw deal,” says Billy Oyugi, associate pastor of Dandora Baptist Church. “The main challenge we face here is poverty. A subset of that is the challenge of seeing bright young people who, because of poverty, cannot further their education.”

The typical Dandora family, Oyugi says, consists of a mother, a father (often absent) and five children living in two rooms. There’s little access to medical care; you get sick, you pray to get better. Few jobs. Bad, dangerous schools. Hunger, crime, drugs, alcoholism, prostitution.

Oyugi knows the score: He grew up in Dandora. His father was an alcoholic he rarely saw. Oyugi got into drugs, gambling and the other trouble slum youths easily find. But his mother was a strong Christian. She enlisted him in a Christian child sponsorship program that helped him get an education — and learn that another, ever-present Father loved him.

“One day my sponsor sent me a lovely Christmas card, the first I’d ever received in my life,” he remembers. “When I opened it, I knew somebody cared about me. I knew that day there was hope in my life.”

Beacon of light

Today, Oyugi and others at Dandora Baptist share hope with their neighbors — especially children and young people, who constitute more than 60 percent



MAKING A LIVING — Agneta (right), a mother of three, makes a living selling chapattis (tortilla-like bread). She follows Christ and asks Him for forgiveness when she misses church to do business on Sunday, one of her best selling days. “I am a business lady,” she says, and she needs to feed her children. (IMB PHOTO)

of Dandora’s population. The church, which sits on a dusty square in the area, is a beacon of light in the smoky miasma of Dandora.

It operates a medical clinic, helps HIV/AIDS patients, teaches job skills to young people and heads of households and sponsors a school and child development center for hundreds of needy children. “Our teachers are missionaries,” Oyugi stresses.

The congregation also sponsors home churches in each district of Dandora and runs a “Jesus Training Center” that offers a six-month course for believers.

“We have done missions all over Kenya,” Oyugi reports. “Our purpose is not just to reach the lost but to teach our members to do evangelism and discipleship. We rejoice when we see one of them discovering what God intends for them to do and just getting on with it.”

Especially young people. Like Catherine, now 20, a daughter of Dandora. She grew up on a tough street, burdened by constant violence. She was expected to follow the pattern — young, single motherhood, drugs and other self-destructive behaviors.

Instead, she broke the pattern with the help of God and Dandora Baptist Church. Now she aspires to be a lawyer. She belongs to “Groups of Hope,” a band of young Christian adults who encourage each other and reach out to youth in local schools.

“I want to be an example to other girls in the community,” she says. “How can I motivate them?”

You already are, Catherine.



30 ACRES OF GARBAGE — A woman waits to weigh items scavenged from Nairobi's huge municipal dump in the Dandora slum. Several thousand Dandora residents survive by selling anything of value they can find in the dump, which snakes for 30 acres through public housing and shantytowns where some 600,000 people live. (IMB PHOTO)