BITTER HARVEST
THE SOCIAL COSTS OF STATE FAILURE IN RURAL KENYA

Paul Francis, World Bank
and
Mary Amuyunzu-Nyamongo, African Institute for Health and Development
Pfrancis@worldbank.org

Abstract: Over the last two decades, Kenyans have suffered serious reverses in economic and social wellbeing. This paper explores the causes and social consequences of economic decline in rural areas, and in particular the upsurge of crime and violence which has lately characterized rural Kenya. The corruption or collapse of formal institutions and reduced access to land, together with the impact of HIV and AIDS have eroded livelihood systems. Households have responded to declining assets, services and opportunities through diversification and new forms of local collective action. The gendered nature of these responses has radically impacted intra-household relations, and livelihood stress in rural households is increasingly reflected in tension and violence. The paper goes on to consider the rapid rise in crime and violence in rural Kenya, and the psychological impacts of eroding livelihoods exemplified in substance abuse and other evidence of psychological anomie.

Keywords: Africa; Kenya; rural development; livelihoods; coping strategies; diversification; crime; violence; gender; social exclusion; anomie

DISCLAIMER:
This is a draft working paper produced for the World Bank conference, ‘New Frontiers of Social Policy: Development in a Globalizing World’. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Bank for Reconstruction/The World Bank Group and its affiliated organizations, or its Executive Directors, or the governments they represent. If you wish to cite from this document please request the latest version from the author(s) or from socialpolicy@worldbank.org.
INTRODUCTION

In its early years of independence, Kenya was the most prosperous country in East Africa, its GDP per capita rising by 38 percent between 1960 and 1980. The following two decades to 2000, however, recorded a zero increase in per capita GDP, and per capita income in 2003, at US$360, was lower than in 1990. Poverty incidence rose from 49 percent in 1990 to 56 percent in 2005 (GoK 2005). Kenya’s social indicators have declined in tandem with the economy: infant mortality rose from 63 (per 1,000 births) in 1990 to 78 in 2002. Life expectancy fallen from 57 to 46 years, in part due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The persisting hunger of children is evidenced in the 19 percent of under-fives who are underweight, and almost one in three (31 percent) who are wasting (CBS 2004). These are averages, but Kenya is a highly unequal society, with exclusion and disadvantage reflecting stratification by class, gender, and region. Kenya’s Gini coefficient for household income, at 0.57, is much higher than that of its East African neighbors, Uganda and Tanzania, whose coefficients stand at 0.37 and 0.38 respectively (GoK 2003; UNDP 2005). This ranks Kenya as one of the ten most unequal countries in the world, and the five most unequal in Africa. Inequality has been increasing, especially since 1994, when Kenya’s Gini coefficient was 0.45. As a result, the richest 10 percent of Kenya’s households now control more than 42 percent of the country’s total income, while the poorest decile make do with well under one percent (UNDP 2005).

This paper explores the causes and social consequences of economic decline and growing inequality in Kenya, focusing particularly on the recent rapid growth of violence in rural areas. This violence takes a number of forms: social (e.g. domestic violence), institutional (such as violence in schools), economic (accompanying property crime) and political (in thuggery and ethnic clashes). Moser (1996) has argued that communities’ ability to cope depends not only on their material well-being, but also on their social capital – the trust, networks, and reciprocal arrangements that link people with their communities. Up to a point, such social capital may be strengthened by economic crisis, but beyond that threshold, networks become overwhelmed social systems break down with disastrous consequences. Physical insecurity exacerbates the breakdown of social capital due to economic crisis, rendering the provision of positive opportunities for asset accumulation impossible (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo & Ezeh 2005, Rakodi 2002). While
increases in violence and crime under conditions of economic decline have often been noted in urban environments, especially in Latin America (Moser and McIlaine 2005; Buvinic et al., 1999), this paper shows how similar conditions have emerged in rural Kenya.

The next section of the paper explores the social, economic and institutional changes underlying this epidemic of violence, identifying the main factors responsible for driving changing conditions under which rural households operate: widespread institutional degradation and declining access to land. The subsequent section examines the coping mechanisms of rural households in response to these pressures, and shows how the gendered nature of these responses, in changing the respective roles of men and women, has put severe strain on household relations, a situation reflected characterised in growing domestic violence. At the societal level, economic decline and social dislocation have resulted in an upsurge in crime and violence, accompanied by other symptoms of social and psychological distress.

The paper is based on research undertaken in six Kenyan districts representing six of its seven provinces: Isiolo District (Eastern Province), Nakuru (Rift Valley), Bungoma (Western), Kisii (Nyanza), Kiambu (Central), and Kwale (Coast) between February and May 2005. A range of participatory tools were used to gather qualitative data including in-depth interviews with key informants, focus group discussions (FGDs), social and institutional mapping and participant observation. These tools were complemented by quantitative data collected by use of an interviewer-administered questionnaire (710 people) at the household level.

FACTORS ERODING RURAL ASSETS AND LIVELIHOODS

Two main factors have been responsible for the erosion of rural livelihoods and assets: the widespread decline or collapse of institutions and services, and the pressure on natural resources and particularly on access to land.
INSTITUTIONAL DEGRADATION AND COLLAPSE

Transparency International publishes an annual international index of perceptions of corruption, according to which Kenya’s performance has been consistently very poor. A CPI score of 2 or less (out of a maximum of 10) indicates severe, endemic or pervasive corruption, and Kenya’s rating has hovered around this level since the surveys began in 1996 (Transparency International 1996-2005).

The six government departments (out of 34) ranked by the public as the most corrupt in the Transparency International Kenya surveys were, in order: Kenya police, Teachers Service Commission, Local Authorities, Judiciary, Ministry of Lands, and Provincial Administration (Transparency International 2002, 2004, 2005).

Given their widespread reliance on the production of export and food crops for sale, the increasing unreliability and inefficiency of agricultural marketing organizations has also been very damaging to the livelihoods of rural households. In the case of coffee, the transaction costs of marketing have been swollen by the mismanagement, politicization, and uneconomic fragmentation of coffee cooperatives (to whom farmers are obliged to sell) as a result of local factionalism and huge levels of indebtedness. As a result, Kenyan smallholders receive less than one-half of the auction price of coffee (Karanja and Nyoro 2002). Even more dramatically, many pyrethrum growers were left stranded by the virtual collapse of marketing activities by the parastatal Kenya Pyrethrum Board in 2002, leaving farmers unpaid for several years of production.

Poor rural services are owed in part to the structure and functioning of the Kenya’s local government system, which suffers from fragmented organization, limited devolved powers and constrained resources. As a result, local government remains too weak to play an effective role in the oversight and coordination of investments and services. While, with the advent of the NARC (National Rainbow Coalition) government in late 2002, resources have been made available at constituency level, these are not systematically coordinated with processes of district planning or technical support and may in some cases be vulnerable for diversion as political patronage.
ACCESS TO LAND

Land, from which ninety percent of rural residents (who account for some 4 out of 5 Kenyans), directly derive their livelihoods, is a key asset for rural households (KLA, undated; GoK, 2002). However, a combination of demographic pressure, highly unequal distribution, and a problematic and corrupted tenure regime make access to land increasingly scarce and inequitable. While there is enormous variation between areas, the ratio of land under crop cultivation to agricultural population in Kenya (a rough proxy for per capita farm size) halved between the 1960s and the 1990s (from 0.46 to 0.23 ha/person). Available land is very unequally distributed: the Gini Coefficient of land per capita in 1997 in agricultural districts was 0.56, with the lowest two quartiles owning 0.08 and 0.17 hectares of land respectively, indicating a high level of functional landlessness. Land degradation and erosion in many areas exacerbate the problem of access. Most women only have access to land under severely disadvantaged terms, and may lose all rights to land and property on the death of their husbands (KLA 2003).

Land in Kenya has always been a highly politicized resource. From the 1980s, however, fraudulent allocations of public land, including forest reserve, increasingly became a central element in the system of political spoils in all parts of the country. The courts are clogged with land disputes, and resort to violence between rival claimants is a common occurrence (Cross 2002). Pressure on land is one of the main sources of tension within households. As an assistant chief in Bungoma observed:

Land is becoming small yet there are too many people who depend on it as the main source of income. Several families have fought due to land. Last night, a woman and her children killed a man because of land. He had two wives and he was in the process of applying for an Agricultural Finance Cooperative loan. Fearing that she would lose the land, the woman organized for the murder. Most fights come from land.

LIVELIHOOD SHIFTS AND GENDER RELATIONS

Livelihood diversification has been widely recognized phenomena in Africa in recent decades as households have sought to sustain themselves by means of a wider array of economic activities (e.g. Ellis, 2000), while the growing importance of non-farm income has been described as ‘de-agrarianization’ (Bryceson 1996). While these
processes can be a positive response to new opportunities, they may also reflect a forced shift into more marginal activities as assets become eroded and former livelihood systems unviable.

Forms of diversification recorded in our study included shifts to new farm enterprises, to off-farm sources of income, and to non-farm activities. The unreliability or collapse of marketing arrangements for export crops has led many households to shift to the cultivation of food crops for sale, in spite of the problems of marketing bulky and perishable produce given the poor state of physical infrastructure. Other activities adopted include tree farming or stall fed cattle. Off-farm, rural households are increasingly looking for income to occupations such as petty trading (for example of foodstuffs and second-hand clothes), itinerant hawking, boda boda (bicycle ‘taxis’), brick making, brick laying and selling water. Beer brewing has become an important source of income for rural women.

For those without land or capital, casual labor either on the farms of better-off neighbors, or, in more accessible areas, in nearby urban settlements, may be the only source of income, though rates of pay for casual labor are low, especially for women (typically KSh 50 to 60 ($0.67 to $0.80) per day – hardly sufficient for a meal. Out migration to both rural and urban areas is another option – often these movements follow long established patterns drawing on networks of information and contacts established by earlier waves of migration. The unqualified go into domestic service or join the urban casual labor force, while those with some education hold out for better opportunities. While migration brings opportunities and sometimes remittances, for those left at home, it can have negative impacts on rural households, reducing labour available for agriculture, and adding to the vulnerability of households headed by women and the elderly, especially given that traditional collective and reciprocal labour arrangements have collapsed in most areas (a situation exacerbated by the impact of HIV/AIDS).

In many communities, collective responses to livelihood erosion were apparent. Community-based organizations have a long history in Kenya, and include women’s groups, welfare associations, youth groups, communal self-help groups and savings and credit associations (Wanyama 2003). Such groups have come together to provide support for their members, promoting income generation. Even relatively poor communities
band together to supplement the failing services of the state through the provision of school and dispensary buildings, and produce buying centers, or to recruit and pay teachers where government staffing is inadequate.

The shifts in livelihood system which have impinged on rural Kenyan households have not been gender neutral. The collapse of established sources of income from cash crops such as coffee, pyrethrum and sugar, the decline of pastoralism for political, security and ecological reasons, and the falling off of the forms of labor migration established during the colonial period have affected men and women differently, and resulted in profound shifts in gender relations. To generalize rather broadly, the livelihood systems which have thereby been most severely eroded tended to be dominated by men. Traditionally, even though production systems were underpinned by women’s productive and domestic labour, as in cash crop production, male dominance was secured through patriarchal land tenure systems and customary norms controlling the disposal of cash income. Pastoralism was also largely a male preserve. Likewise, men have been the main agents in labor migration.

Concurrent with the ‘demasculination’ of the rural economy, new opportunities – such as food crop production, petty trade, informal services, beer brewing, casual labour, domestic service, and the gathering of firewood and other non-timber forest products – have tended to extend traditional female roles. These factors have conditioned the very different ways in which men and women have responded to change. Men, with unreliable markets for traditional produce, crumbling niches for migratory employment and (for pastoralists) their herds in decline, have increasingly found themselves unable to live up to established norms of supporting their households. Their characteristic response has been one of withdrawal. Women, finding themselves responsible for filling a growing gap in household provisioning, are obliged to support themselves and their children by multiple means: a combination of intensification, diversification and cooperation. As a result, women find themselves not only the domestic but the economic core of households, while men have moved to the periphery, in fact, if not in ideology. This is also reflected in patterns of residence: more than one-in three rural Kenyan households are now headed by women (CBS 2004).
Findings from Isiolo district illustrate some of these points. In Manyatta Demo, Isiolo district, where the pastoral economy has never recovered from the brutal government counter-insurgency activities in the 1960s and raiding by groups from the east in the 1980s and 1990s, men have relatively few economic activities. Most have no capital or stock, and are obliged to produce and sell charcoal, an activity which is precarious, low return, and illegal. Women, on the other hand, have a much wider set of pursuits: collecting and selling of firewood, selling miraa (*khat*), milk, eggs and honey; gathering wild fruits, herbal medicines and incense; weaving baskets and mats; and making bread. While most of these activities are small-scale and low-return, they nevertheless amount to a portfolio on which their households survive. Similarly, in Nakuru, pyrethrum production for export has been replaced by the cultivation of food crops for the domestic market, which women are mainly responsible for cultivating. As one woman put it: ‘the children have to eat and attend school’.

Alongside with the rising demands placed on women by changing livelihoods systems, domestic responsibilities care has also increased. The burden of caring for the sick (multiplied by HIV/AIDS) falls largely on women and girls, along with the chores of childcare, cooking and the collection of water and firewood. The community responsibilities of women have also increased: women’s groups to be more ubiquitous, active and effective than men’s.

Hence, while livelihood erosion has undermined the social value, identity and self-esteem of men, for women, the ubiquitous triple burden – in the economic, domestic and community spheres – has intensified in all three dimensions. However, men’s ‘disempowerment’ (Silbershmidt 2005) is not translated into the empowerment of women, since the recognition of the feminization of the rural economy is obscured and muted by patriarchal ideology. Although women are increasingly the generators of household income, men still control immoveable and moveable property, and seek to retain decisions making power over disposal and expenditure. As one Bungoma man put it: ‘if she [my wife] buys sugar, I have bought it. If she buys a cow, it is mine because she lives in my house and tills my land free of charge.’ The increasing divergence between patriarchal ideology and the material reality of household provisioning leads to tensions that more and more often overflow into violence.
Gender violence

Half of all Kenyan women have experienced violence since they were 15, and one in four in the twelve months prior to being interviewed (three in ten in the case of currently married women). There is substantial regional variation in these figures, with domestic violence most endemic in the west of the country: proportions of women having experienced violence were 73 percent in Western and 60 percent in Nyanza Provinces, compared to the lowest figure of 30 percent in Coast province. Husbands (58%) are the main perpetrators of this violence, followed by teachers (26%), mothers (24%), fathers (15%) and brothers (8%) (CBS 2004).

Regional variations in domestic violence appear to relate both to cultural norms and to increasing pressure on land and livelihoods. In Bungoma and Kisii the ‘disciplining’ of wives was described as if it were an elemental component of local culture. A typical view expressed by a Bungoma man was that ‘a woman must be beaten by the man to instill respect and a sense of discipline.’

Such expressions of timeless patriarchy aside, our interviews indicated that, far from being a hangover from a primitive past, domestic violence is in fact increasing in both incidence and severity. Women emphasized the link between domestic violence and the recent rise in alcohol abuse. In many parts of Kenya, traditional norms, while permitting a man to beat his wife, also circumscribed the scope of violence: if he acted without pretext, drew blood, or broke a limb, he would have to answer to, and compensate, his in-laws. With the fragmentation of extended family ties, these limited protections for women have largely broken down.

Growing violence against women is also manifested in the escalating incidence of rape in Kenya. Rape often accompanies other crimes and rural women, frequently obliged to fetch water or forest products during the night, are especially vulnerable to sexual assault. Rape is not reported for many reasons, not least because of the limited seriousness with which it is taken by the police, and so official statistics are of limited use in establishing trends. However, Police statistics show that 2,800 cases of rape were reported in Kenya in 2004, an increase of 500 compared to the previous year, and over five times higher than in 1990, when only 515 cases were reported. Kenya’s Coalition on
Violence against Women estimates that only 8 percent of women report rape to health officials or police.

**Intergenerational conflict**

In many rural Kenyan households, tension between the generations is high. Unemployment among young people is such that they often lack the resources to establish their own households and are obliged to remain in the parental home. Youth wishing to farm are often constrained by the limited land available and its control by the older generation. Unemployment, combined with the expectations created by education breed hopelessness and frustration. On their part, parents complain that their grown-up children do not pull their weight in contributing to household income. Parental disapproval of children’s lifestyles and anxiety about the risks of their engagement in risky behaviors such as substance abuse and crime is another source of tension. Relationships between male youth and their families are particularly fraught. Media reports of violence between parents and children are now increasingly frequent.

The reasons given for intergenerational violence in survey communities are given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Kiambu (n = 78)</th>
<th>Kwale (n = 10)</th>
<th>Isiolo (n = 50)</th>
<th>Kisii (n = 58)</th>
<th>Nakuru (n = 39)</th>
<th>Bungoma (n = 78)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of food</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate access to livestock</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to land</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol consumption</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of school fees</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money/finances</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranged Marriages</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parents fighting | 11 | 5 | 10 | 14 | 8 | 2

Land was the leading cause of tension in densely-populated Kiambu (562 persons per km$^2$) and Bungoma (424 pers/km$^2$) districts, as well as in Nakuru (164 pers/km$^2$) where land shortage was compounded by severe inequity of distribution. By custom in many groups, land is not transferred to children until the death of the father. Sons may thus hold only provisional rights in land for many years, and be reluctant to invest in agriculture. Tradition is only one reason for parent’s reluctance to apportion land: in the land-short districts, there were complaints of children selling off family land to offset debts or for immediate consumption. Land was much less of an issue for intergenerational conflict in Kwale (60 pers/km$^2$), and pastoral Isiolo (4 pers/km$^2$). Interestingly, in Kisii, the most densely populated of all rural districts (758 pers/ km$^2$), the leading cause of contention between children and parents was school fees. The fragmentation of land is now so acute that agriculture is no longer considered a viable livelihood, and education is seen as the only route out of poverty (even if an increasingly precarious one). In Kwale, and parts of Isiolo district, tensions between generations were mostly said to be fueled by alcohol.

Violence against children is also institutionalized in schools. As noted above, the perpetrator of the violence for 26 percent of women had been a teacher. According to Human Rights Watch:

For most Kenyan children, violence is a regular part of the school experience. Teachers use caning, slapping and whipping to maintain classroom discipline and to punish children for poor academic performance. The infliction of corporal punishment is routine, arbitrary, and often brutal. Bruises and cuts are regular by-products of school punishments, and more severe injuries (broken bones, knocked-out teeth, internal bleeding) are not infrequent. At times, beating by teachers leave children permanently disfigured, disable, or dead (1999: 2).

Crime, violence and insecurity in rural areas

As a United Nations report notes, crime:
impairs the overall development of nations, undermines spiritual and material well being, compromizes human dignity and creates a climate of fear and violence, which endangers personal security and erodes the quality of life (1992:6).

The crime rate in Kenya rose by 51 percent between 1994 and 2000. High levels of violence have long been a feature of Nairobi and to a lesser extent other urban areas, but perhaps the most striking finding of our research was the extent to which crime and violence has permeated rural areas. The trend towards rural criminality is a relatively recent phenomenon, traced by most respondents to the last five years. The new wave of rural crime is also associated with unprecedented levels of brutality, robbery increasingly being accompanied by murder, rape, and the wanton destruction of property. Sometimes such acts of violence are not even accompanied by theft, suggesting that they are driven primarily by frustration, anger and resentment. In Bungoma district just before our fieldwork, a gang had attacked ten households, gang raping women and girls, assaulting men and destroying property, but stealing nothing. As one informant observed: ‘it is as if they wanted to humiliate their victims’.

With changing patterns of rural crime, the weapons, too have evolved. In the past, as we were told in Kiambu, thieves used sticks or stones, but now they came with guns, making resistance by victims or neighbors futile or fatal. Decades of instability in surrounding countries and Kenya’s pastoralist periphery have made small arms cheap and readily available. Increasingly, thieves act with the arrogance born of impunity:

‘they come during the day and some even give notice of their intended visit, and there is nothing anyone can do’ (Bungoma informant).

In Ngecha (Kiambu) a woman commented that:

We are producing clever thieves. Young people are educated up to university level but they are jobless. Such people will use their knowledge to steal or they become so frustrated to the extent of venting their anger on innocent community members.

Instances of petty theft – of food from farms and minor items from houses had increased at all sites as poverty had intensified, local enforcement systems and sanctions declined in authority, and the effectiveness of formal policing and justice systems deteriorated. In Nakuru, we were told that food might be stolen while still cooking on the fire, or clothes filched while drying. That these instances were said to be seasonal suggested that they were driven by immediate needs during periods of food shortage. In
Kiambu and Bungoma, on the other hand, petty theft was generally blamed on the need of young men to feed their alcohol and substance abuse habits.

Stealing from the government – for example removing forest products from reserves or water pipes from government stock – was not locally considered as culpable as stealing from individuals. Indeed, an outcome of the buckling of livelihood systems has been recourse to activities which are formally illegal, such as forest exploitation, charcoal burning, commercial sex work, and the brewing, distillation and sale of alcohol. The illegality of these activities exposed to poor to extortion by police, local government or forestry officials. However, given the lack of alternatives this did little to reduce their incidence. In Nakuru, men and women set out at dusk with their bicycles, walking 20 or more kilometers into the forest to collect a load of charcoal and transport it under cover of darkness to Nakuru town. Being caught by officials means a fine, a beating, or both.

Commercial sex work was well established in two of the sample communities. In Bulla Pesa, a suburb of Isiolo town, in which there is a high military presence, prostitution has become the mainstay of the economy. Clients are said to prefer young girls: children as young as 8 years old are involved in the trade, and command the highest prices. This is reflected in the nomenclature: girls aged from 8 to 12 years were known as “nice”, teenagers as “coca cola” (‘sweet but not as good as “nice”’) and girls 20 and over as “mitumba” (second hand). The drawing of children into commercial sex work at such a young age is a reflection both of the extreme desperation of the situation in which many households find themselves, as well as the extent to which community norms have broken down. The ravages of HIV/AIDS could be seen in the number of households consisting only of the children and the aged. Commercial sex workers, while aware of the risks of unprotected sex, complained that their clients were often unwilling to use condoms. Desperation was echoed in the word of one young woman: ‘it is better to live now rather than worry about HIV which will kill you 10 years later’.

The exchange of sexual favors for food or money is not limited to a class of commercial sex workers. Many women, we were told in Sirisia (Bungoma), Karia (Kiambu), and elsewhere, resorted to extra-marital relations to meet their household needs. Such statements may to a degree reflect deepseated fears about moral breakdown, and in particular the control of female sexuality, but they seem also to have a basis in
reality. One man in Karia (Kiambu) described his own humiliation in these words: ‘as a jobless husband you watch and eat the food knowing well that another man paid for it because you have no alternative.’

With increasing levels of crime and violence, security and access to justice are growing concerns in rural Kenya. However, the police are widely regarded as so corrupt and ineffective as to be part of the problem of crime, rather than its solution. Allegations that police (and retrenched former police officers) assisted, protected, and armed criminals, hired out their uniforms, received stolen goods, and even undertook crimes themselves were so regular as to be commonplace. Even when criminals were arrested, they were said to be released without action being taken against them if they had the means for a bribe.

The failure of the government to ensure the security of its citizens has led many rural communities to safeguard their lives and property through the formation of vigilante groups. Such groups patrolled communities at night, systematically ostracized suspected criminals, and on occasion destroyed their property. Vigilantes may go further: lynching has become a widely established phenomenon as communities’ frustration at the unwillingness or inability of formal institutions to control rural crime grows. Lynching was considered not only to purge the community of persistent troublemakers, but to serve as a disincentive to others. It also reflects growing disenchantment at official ineptitude and collusion with criminals, feelings which outweigh the fundamental injustice of mob action and the inability of alleged criminals to defend themselves.

Community policing, and even the excesses of vigilantism, are generally condoned by the authorities. Nevertheless, the organization of bands of youth to protect the community has created its own problems. It is hard to retain young people, who are a mobile group in search of employment to serve on a voluntary basis. Sometimes, once created, vigilante groups have turned to crime and extortion themselves, or have been manipulated into settling grudges or political scores.

The epidemic of crime and violence in rural areas is having an impact on the social composition of rural communities as the better-off are increasingly unwilling to live in, invest in (or even in some cases to visit) their home communities, or are driven by repeated gang attacks to the comparative safety of nearby towns, where clustered
residences facilitate joint security arrangements. In Kisii, middle-class migrants living in Nairobi and other cities may now avoid even staying overnight when visiting their communities of origin for fear of becoming targets of robbery and violence.

Crime is also driving retail and other businesses from rural communities by compounding the costs of doing business though direct losses to criminals, the costs of evasive and protective measures, and the material, psychological and medical costs of violence. A women store-keeper in Karai (Kiambu) told us that she had twice been robbed in the last year on her way to the bank. She now varied her patterns and means of transport, hoping to avoid another incident, but her profits had been decimated and she was on the verge of abandoning her store.

Growing crime and insecurity is both the result of a decline in the social capital of many communities, and a causal factor in accelerating that breakdown by reinforcing social differentiation and decreasing levels of trust between neighbours. Traditional, or informal institutions can often no longer maintain order, and neither do the formal institutions of the state command any confidence.

Substance abuse and psychological anomie

In the final part of this section, we turn attention to the psychological impacts of eroding livelihood assets and the advancing culture of violence which has accompanied it. Development literature has hitherto given little attention to the relationship between social structure and subjective states of mind and feeling, and yet there are at least two good reasons for doing so. First, one of the main social costs of violence and crime is a psychological one: fear and the sense of personal insecurity. Second, the motivation for spiraling, violence increasingly goes beyond the economic to the expressive: with brutality appearing to represent the acting out of emotional states of resentment and frustration. With this in mind, we look briefly at three indicators of psychological anomie in Kenya: alcohol abuse, depression and suicide.

Alcohol abuse is a very widespread problem in Kenya, affecting 70 percent of households according to the Kenya Medical Research Institute. In rural areas, drinking is predominantly, though by no means exclusively, a male activity. Problem drinking is
perceived to have become entrenched relatively recently, and to be associated in particular with male and youth unemployment. In Nakuru, for example, opinion was quite specific about dating the onset of widespread alcohol abuse to the collapse of the pyrethrum market and the resulting underemployment of men. Locally brewed beer was customarily consumed at festivals and celebrations, and was generally the preserve of older men. Today, drinking has increasingly become an everyday activity, starting early in the day, and locally distilled spirits have increasingly replaced beer. Youth have taken over from elders as the most diligent drinkers. Drinking by both primary and secondary school children is now widely reported by teachers. A recent survey for the National Agency for the Campaign Against Drug Abuse showed that of a sample of 10 to 24 year olds, 60 percent of non-students and 9 percent of students had used alcohol within the last month. Other common intoxicants used by young people include tobacco, marijuana, khaat and inhalants such as glue and petrol (of these, only marijuana is illegal) (NACADA 2004).

In most of rural Kenya, women are responsible for the brewing and sale of alcohol, often the most profitable of the limited sources of livelihood open to them. Yet, as the main victim of its consequences (lost household income and aggravated domestic violence), women are also most vocal in condemning the epidemic of alcohol abuse which has beset so many rural communities. In some communities, women highlighted alcohol abuse as the greatest problem facing them, above infrastructure, land, credit and services. The tension between women as brewers and as wives surfaces on occasion when women act collectively to pour away alcohol and isolate brewers in protest at the damage that drinking does their families.

According to WHO, depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide in terms of years lost to disability, and the fourth leading contributor to the global burden of disease (and the second in the 15-44 age group). Given the low state of development of mental health services in Kenya, evidence on the incidence of depression there is patchy, but what is available gives cause to concern. Our quantitative survey included several questions on depression and hopelessness, and the results indicate an average of 37 percent had been depressed, varying between 59 percent in Kiambu and 27 percent in
Kwale. Poverty and money matters were the main reasons given for being depressed, followed by health, unemployment and domestic violence.

Other sources indicate high rates of depression among young people – with 10 percent of young men and 7 percent of young women reporting being depressed nearly all the time to the point of giving up (Centre for the Study of Adolescence 2003). These rates of depression — especially for males — are significantly high relative to global rates, which are generally higher for females than males.6

Young people in Kenya also have an alarmingly high rate of attempted suicides. Official statistics for actual suicide are unreliable: because of the intense social stigma, cases are rarely reported or even mentioned. However, in a recent survey, 7 percent of males and as many as one in ten young Kenyan women reported having attempted suicide at least once (Centre for the Study of Adolescence 2003).7

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has documented several aspects of the rising violence and insecurity which increasingly characterizes rural Kenya, and traced its origins to the erosion of livelihoods. Population pressure and the inequity of the land tenure system have undermined access to key physical assets, while institutional malfunction has debilitated agricultural marketing, health, education and other services. HIV/AIDS has increased the burden of ill-health and dependency in rural households, as well as impinging on service providers through the loss of staff.

Faced with these circumstances, rural households have been obliged to adapt their livelihood strategies by diversifying into new farm enterprises, off-farm and non-farm activities. However, limited assets severely limit their room for maneuver, often forcing them into marginal and even illegal activities. These shifts have had a markedly gendered character. The livelihood systems which have been most severely eroded—cash crop production, pastoralism, labor migration—were those dominated by men while, new opportunities often extend what were traditionally female activities. As a result, men find themselves unable to meet their long-established roles in supporting the household while women’s burdens in the economic, domestic and collective spheres intensify. These shifts in gender roles have had a destabilizing effect on households,
which, while not empowering women in any real sense, leave men feeling disempowered. The growing tension characterizing relations between men and women finds expression in growing domestic violence. At the same time, declining opportunities for youth have increasingly put relations between the generations under strain.

The increasingly violent character of rural intra-household relations can be seen as a facet of the spread of violence at all social levels – against women, against children, against political opponents, in disputes over land, in schools and on the street as well as in the home. The increasingly brutal nature of this violence appears to be an expression of extreme anger, frustration and resentment, a psychological anomie, also exhibited in alcohol and substance abuse. It is clear that the devastating impacts of inequality, corruption and lack of opportunity, are mediated by destructive emotions as much as rational ‘economic’ coping strategies. The inequalities in the distribution of power and resources that have come to characterize Kenyan society are both the start and the end point of the processes of social dislocation described in this paper. Inequality, by centralizing power, stifles opportunity, facilitates corruption, and creates a climate of despair and desperation amongst the poorest.

Our systemic account of the origins of violence in the erosion of economic and institutional assets indicates that the consequences of economic policy and mismanagement have been devastating, and have reached deeply into the foundations of society itself. The implication is that, without equitable growth, and widespread institutional reform, these social tensions are unlikely to be resolved. Peace, security, and the associated social capital are not only conditions for holding and building assets, but are themselves community assets which have hitherto been undervalued in policy (Moser 2006). Beyond this, at the societal level, it is clear that current policy approaches to gender and youth are not adequate to the scale of the problems faced. It will be essential to address not only the growing burden of labor and responsibility falling on women, but also the simultaneous ‘disempowerment’ experienced by men and youth. One way of going beyond the zero sum of gender conflict may be a new focus on building the assets of households through the empowerment of the family unit as a whole.
REFERENCES


---

1 The classification of violence in as political, institutional, economic and social follows Moser and McIlwane (2005).


3 Since the 2003 Health and Demographic Survey was the first survey in which gender-based violence in Kenya has been systematically surveyed, there is no statistical evidence on trends in domestic violence in Kenya.

4 If current trends continue, depression is set by 2020 to become the second leading cause of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) lost for all age groups and both sexes.

5 Ndetei and Mwangi (1979) found a 20 percent incidence of psychiatric illnesses, especially depression and anxiety, among 140 rural medical walk-in patients in Kenya. Dhadphale et al. (1989) found a prevalence of depressive disorders of 9.2 percent, about a third having moderate to severe depression, among a sample of 881 primary health care patients. Other research in Kenya and elsewhere (Maj et al.) has shown a significantly higher rate of depression in symptomatic seropositive individuals than in matched seronegative controls.

6 Globally, it is estimated that the point prevalence of unipolar depressive episodes (i.e. those suffering depression at any particular time) is 1.9 percent for men and 3.2 percent for women, and that 5.8 percent of
men and 9.5 percent of women will experience a depressive episode in a 12 month period. (Global Burden of Disease surveys 2000, quoted in WHO 2001).

7 Based on countries for which complete data is available, the global age standardized-suicide rate for 1996 was 15.1 per 100,000. The rate for males was 24 per 100,000, and that for females 6.8. The rate of suicide is almost universally high among men compared to women by an aggregate ration of 3.5 to 1. Male suicide rates are also rising much more rapidly than female.