
RUBEN CENTRE, KENYA

Audio transcript: <https://erf.org.au/app/uploads/2022/10/Ruben-Centre-Classroom-Audio-File.mp3>

Mukuru community is one of the many slums in Nairobi. It's got about 100000 households and maybe about half a million people live in those households. Like the other slums, it's got some significant challenges. The obvious ones are things like poor hygiene and sanitation, lack of health care facilities. So there's constant outbreaks of illnesses like typhoid and cholera. There's poor education facilities, poverty obviously, crime, frequent fires from illegal electricity connections and the constant threat to households of being displaced by government.

Human rights violations are rampant and cases of child exploitation and gender based violence are common. Most people live on less than a dollar a day, and because many are uneducated, they can't secure formal employment. Most take on short term jobs within Mukuru working as factory labourers or hawkers, hustling as they call it. Children and young people are the most affected, and they often look to risky means of survival, such as prostitution, drug dealing, begging, dumpster diving and other criminal activities.

This often leads to HIV AIDS infection, early teenage pregnancies, abortion, truancy from school and even death. At first glance, you might think that the solution to these problems would be to provide charity handouts of food or clothing to the families, or perhaps you might think you would sponsor an individual child.

The problem is that this approach would mean that parents would remain poor and not be empowered with the skills to earn a living, to pay for their family's needs and the children's education and then dependency over a prolonged period of time would be created. The cycle for relatively small numbers of sponsored children to complete school and then obtain employment before being able to contribute to their community would be a very long term solution, whilst others in the community would remain poor. The alternative to this is what we would call a development approach.

The Ruben Primary School is the only public school in Mukuru. It offers free quality primary education for 2700 children and the classrooms, as you can see from the photograph, are very crowded. Teachers, counsellors, community health volunteers are all provided regular training to ensure that children have access to safe learning environments and that health issues and other factors that could impact their learning are identified and addressed. The investment in training these teachers and staff ensures that the skills they learn can reach many thousands in the community rather than focusing on a small number of individuals.

Although basic, the classroom resources such as desks and learning materials are investments in education that many children in the community can benefit from over the years. Ruben Centre also provides vocational training, job placement and small loans to many parents so that they can obtain employment or start their own businesses and therefore support their families and strengthen their whole communities.