

ISEE Reflections

Learning from the future – how children of Mukuru fancy the city of tomorrow

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Major traffic axes are colourful and tidy

Sustainability means meeting the needs of today without compromising the needs of the next generations. How can we meet the needs of the next generations, if we do not even know what these needs are? If we do not listen to the next generation and learn from them? Do we even meet the needs of today for everyone on earth?

Esther Kamaara, who founded the Star Kids Initiative, a home that provides mentorship and a place to be in Mukuru for street kids, gave us the opportunity to meet and learn first-hand about the children's utopia of the city of tomorrow.

Esther took us through Mukuru. An overwhelming moment for most Europeans, who are typically not familiar with the impressions, and typically only know pictures of slums from newspapers and television. The expectation, then, is to see colourless huts, mal-odour, dirt, disease, pure poverty, and sad, hopeless people. Expectedly, all this can be found behind the shelters made of corrugated metal and stacked blocks. The more surprising is the first impression: many facades are painted in colour, blue, pink, red, green, in between clothes lines with colourful dresses. The residents are not running around erratically. Those who can be seen are busy. Colourfully dressed women walk determined, elder siblings care for the younger ones, hand in hand. Men engrossed in serious communication. We see chemist's shops, general stores, mobile phone shops, coal dealers, and hair salons. The major roads are well-structured and clean, beautiful in a fragile way. Hardly any plastic rubble can be found – the result maybe of the environmentally conscious decision of the Kenyan government to abolish plastic bags.



Above the roofs of Mukuru

Nevertheless, the perception of this artery diverges from the truth behind, where families live in tiny, ramshackle shelters without sanitation and electricity. The open canals and gullies are sewerage and waste disposal. The children wear worn out clothes, often with no shoes or shabby plastic slippers. They have runny noses, many have lost gazes without much expectation.



Street is the place to be for the children

It does not feel right to take pictures, unwanted, like starring at an attraction. Yet, we take a few decent shots with the mobile phones, as it seems too urgent to show back home, how life can be, how the real world is like, in other places. The facades in the central roads may look colourful to us, but it cannot plaster the daily struggle of the people behind it.

When we entered the Star Kids campus, it was like a small beautiful island within an ocean full of hardships. The kids had space to play, run around and mingle with each other without disturbances. The tutors were caring and full of love, and it seems they knew all the children's peculiarities and stories and gave special attention to it.

When we went to the classroom, the kids were only reserved in the very beginning, but after Esther's warm-up exercises, the kids were very sociable with no fear of contact. They were quickly very warm and welcoming, full of heart-felt interest.



Diligently, the children craft their dream houses

The kids were given all kind of handicraft tools such as scissors, glue, paper and pens and the task to create their individual utopias of the city of the future. For about one and a half hour, they created, built, cut, formed and drew all kinds of houses, vehicles, and structures that came into their minds. The results were very variable in their appearance, but the expectations were very similar, just varying in the location, where the houses were supposed to be built, in town, in nature, in wildlife, or close to the sea.

The utopias of the children were smaller than expected. No exaggerated skyscrapers, no speedy vehicles, no



After handicraft work with paper, some material experiments were conducted with mortar



Small portions of luck, a small business like a hair salon, a small hostel or a shop

Star Kids Initiative



Kenya is often considered as paradise with its extraordinary sunsets, diverse wildlife and breathtaking landscapes. However, the reality for most people in this country is less romantic. Kenya has a population of 44 million people, 42% of which, unfortunately, live below the international poverty line. As a blossoming product of the state, this statistic weighs me down. Heavy hearted, I founded Star Kids Initiative, a community-based organization that exists to provide children from urban slums access to quality education, in a bid to have my own significant share in mitigating poverty. In

five years, Star Kids Initiative has partnered with four schools in Nairobi, impacting 1973 children. We run a bi-weekly mentorship program that focuses on exposing kids to life outside of the slums through experiential mentorship sessions, inspirational trips to landmark destinations, training in economic empowerment and life skills. We also run a scholarship program enabling up to 30 children to remain in school. Beyond this direct tuition support, we believe the children's learning environment contributes to the quality of their experience. We therefore support infrastructural projects in our partner schools. We have facilitated the refurbishment of a library, toilet facilities and most recently, an ongoing playground development project.

Esther Kamaara, Founder of the Star Kids Initiative