

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



The children created small cosy places where they feel they belong to

impressive underground structures, but rather small and cosy places where they feel they belong to. Just with a little bit more space for their parents, siblings, and best friends, maybe a tree and some animals, and in addition tiny items like stairs in front of the house or a separate cooking place.

Their expectations were so low compared to the utopias of the children in the developed countries of the Northern hemisphere, yet, it was tangible that most of these kids will probably never even experience this tiny little expected betterment. They are too far away from the focus of global and local politics to benefit from any economic upswing. They seek for small portions of luck, a small business like a hair salon, a small hostel or a shop.

When we talk about sustainability in a political, economic or scientific context, we always sit high up in the ivory tower, we use numbers, statistics, technical data, predictions. These kids on the ground are real. Their utopias are the utopias of about one third of the global population. They do not have a voice, they do not have a choice. They are typically forgotten by those who define sustainability.

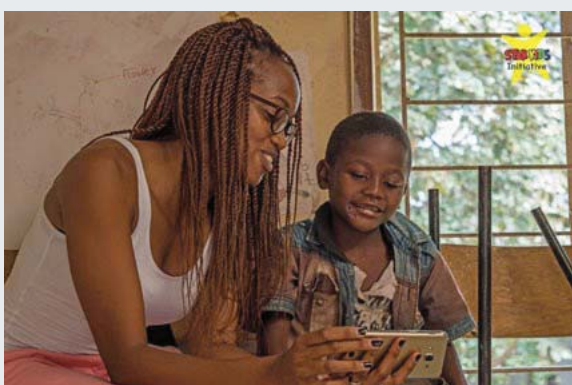
But if we want to take the word by its meaning, we must accept that they are the generation, whose needs must not be compromised by our today's behaviour. Without any question, it is inevitable to develop and find concepts for the sustainable use of global resources in order to maintain climate conditions that keep the Earth a comfortable place to live also in the future. However, for a large part of the population, the Earth already today has never been a comfortable place to live on, with or without the threatening climate change.

If sustainability means meeting the needs of today without compromising the needs of the next generations, it automatically includes the concern about today's generations. And already today, the demands of large global population parts cannot be met. Sustainability always starts here and today. It starts with our children, it starts in our neighbourhoods, and it starts with including those who are marginalised in our societies. This should be the driving force for us to act, tomorrow anyway, but already today.



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