



“WE JUST SCREAM AND HOPE FOR HELP”: THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN FIRE DISASTER MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF KIANDUTU, KIAMBU COUNTY, KENYA



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RESEARCH OUTLINE

This investigated how the community in Kiandutu, an informal settlement on the outskirts of Thika, Kenya, responds and prepares for the recurring threat of fire disasters. These fires, often caused by faulty electrical wiring, highly flammable housing materials, and limited access of emergency services, have resulted in loss of life and destruction of homes. Despite the severity of the issue, there is limited academic engagement on how fire risks are managed at the community level in such contexts.

Drawing on interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations, the research explores the role of the local community in fire prevention, response, and recovery, and examines how these efforts relate to the broader concept of community resilience. The findings reveal that while there is strong social cohesion and willingness to engage in disaster response, community efforts are constrained by poverty, lack of training, and limited external support. Moreover, many residents adopt a passive stance, awaiting government-led formalisation of the settlement, an expectation that often discourages grassroots initiatives.

Additionally, this study finds that community-based organisations are notably scarce in Kiandutu, with no initiatives currently focused on fire disaster management. The absence of fire safety education, structured training, and early warning systems leaves the community highly exposed to potential fire disasters. This vulnerability is compounded by limited engagement from external actors such as NGOs. This restricts the opportunities for building local capacity and coordinated response systems. As a result, efforts to strengthen resilience remain limited, making it difficult for the community to move from reactive coping to proactive preparedness.

This research contributes to the academic literature by highlighting the structural and social barriers to community resilience in under-supported informal settlements. It calls for targeted investment in local training initiatives, improved coordination between communities and local governments, and policies that either integrate informal settlements into formal urban planning or tailor disaster risk reduction strategies to informal contexts. Ultimately, enhancing resilience in Kiandutu requires both local empowerment and broader systemic reforms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

”What role does the Kiandutu community play concerning fire disaster management, and how can this contribute to community resilience?

Sub Questions:

Q1: What types of community-based initiatives/organisations are most commonly involved in fire disaster management in the Kiandutu slums?

Q2: What specific roles does the community play in fire disaster preparedness, response, and recovery?

Q3: What role does informality play in shaping the disparities between informal and formal settlements in terms of fire disaster preparedness, response, and recovery?

Q4: What challenges do the community in Kiandutu face in fire disaster management (e.g., funding, training, coordination)?

Q5: How can the community be integrated into existing disaster management policy?

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognize Informal Settlements as Permanent Urban Realities
Shift policy from temporary neglect to long-term inclusion and support.
- Accelerate KISIP II Implementation
Fast-track infrastructure upgrades, especially roads and water access, to improve emergency response.
- Empower Through Community-Based Training
Fund and facilitate local fire safety training, first responder teams, and evacuation planning.
- Integrate Fire Safety into Education
Adapt the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) to informal settlement realities; train teachers accordingly.
- Invest in Basic Infrastructure
Improve water availability and road access to enable timely fire response.
- Promote Participatory Planning
Engage residents, local leaders, and experts in co-creating disaster preparedness solutions.
- Prioritize Support, Not Substitution
NGOs and government should enable—not replace—local leadership and action.

”Building resilience in Kiandutu means recognising informal settlements not as problems to be fixed, but as communities to be empowered through training, infrastructure, education, and inclusive planning that puts people at the centre of their own safety.“