About Men on the Pavement in Kenya

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1. Acknowledgement
I acknowledge all my interviewees listed in appendix 2. Thanks to HPI and UCT for funding the field work.

2. Abbreviations:
- MP - Men on the Pavement
- MSR – Men on the side of the road
- CCN – City council of Nairobi

3. Introduction
These are skilled and semi skilled laborers, herein referred to as Men on the pavement (MP), who gather along a famous Nairobi street called Moi Avenue. Nairobi is the capital city of Kenya. The site has been in existence since 1932. The evidence for this was Mzee Omollo** who informed that he has been visiting the site since 1965.

As the Men on the pavement (MP) wait for clients, they hold painting brushes and other tools for identification purposes. When one passes along their waiting points, they might think that they are all painters as majority of them hold brushes. This is not true as during my stay with them, I was informed that those who don’t have painting brushes posses other skills such as carpentry, wood sanding, electrical and so on. Overall their waiting style is casual as shown in picture 1. A typical client will either call or come to the site. According to one of my interviewees, clients who come to the site normally do so as though they are passing by. Eventually they identify one person who will be his contact person for the others. Note: the man on the extreme right in figure 1 is a passerby, and that how a client will typically approach the site.
Training and Skills acquisition
About 71% of my interviewees had painting skills. 14% were electricians while the rest had other skills such as carpentry, plumbing and fitting. Most (above 70%) of the job seekers acquired their skills through experience. Only a few went to youth polytechnic and vocational schools. For some reason I was not able to establish, many people know the site as consisting of only painters. As a result of these, the site has attracted the attention of the most known paint manufacturing companies in Kenya. In what has been seen by the job seekers as a marketing strategy, most of the paint manufacturing companies have been regularly training them on the new paint products.

Site organization and leadership
“Men on the pavement” has self-organized based on tribe or ethnic affiliation. Indeed their leadership is tribal. The site has about four groups namely the luO#, the kikuyu#, the kamba# and the luhyah#. Other small tribes join the big ones depending on how close they are to them. Unless one studies the MP keenly, it is not easy to notice the tribal groupings. This is because they are always not far from each other and the fact that the waiting point is not spacious enough to allow them to fully separate.

According to the interviewees, the leadership is divided into ethnic groups. Each ethnic group represented has a team leader who is in charge of member registration. Member registration is paper based and is free of charge, unlike in the past where new members were required to pay a registration fee of Kenya shillings 200 (approximately USD 2.5). During that time, they had a general office (virtual) officiated by an overall chairman. Generally MP has a weak functional leadership whose work is to arbitrate and solve disputes whenever they arise. They engage the city council of Nairobi on matters of job seekers rights and safety. Their informal organization has a set of conventions, codes of conduct and norms which serve as platforms for behavior.

Population of Men on the pavement
It was indicated to me that on average, one can count up to about hundred (100) men around the pavement at any given time. Most of these men always carry a painting brush as a sign that they are on a job seeking mission. Collectively, the total number adds to about a thousand (1000). This means that at one time, there are a total of 900 men either working somewhere or are out of job and out of job searching.

The interview took place between 18th June 2010 and 20th July 2010 and I had a chance to interview fourteen job seekers (list in appendix 2). I interviewed more than half of the Men on the Pavement more than once.

4. Specific Findings
This section of the document outlines specifics findings with regards to elements of my research. They are the demographic information, social dynamics, technology use, work skills, literacy levels, language, income and expenditure, and general issues.
Demographics
Men on the pavement are all male. Their ages range from thirty (30) to seventy years (70). They are all Kenyan citizens from different parts of the country.

Social dynamics
As indicated earlier, MP is a self organized group. In general, there is a weak link between members. However there exist small sub-organizations within the bigger one. The sub groups are constituted on tribal basis. The link is stronger between members of a sub group more than it is among members of two different sub groups.

I asked the question: “since when did you start being a member of MP?” The answer to this question showed that the youngest members have been there for three years, while the oldest have been there for well over thirty five years (between 3 to 37), average being 19 years

MP have no formal linkages with any formal organization. Their relationship with paint manufacturing companies is informal and temporary. I also noted that the group has a weak link with the City Council of Nairobi where the latter has allowed them to use a back street of Moi avenue as their waiting place. This is where the City Council has put up seats for them.

Skills
The Moi avenue site is rich in skills. I found out that all its members were skilled with some of them having very high skills such as being a fully qualified electricians and certified painters. Available skills include, but not limited to carpentry, painting, electrical, brick laying, glass and general fitting, welding and many others that may be classified as general skills. A good percentage of MP (over 90%) attended school with some of them attaining (over 30 %) O-level. Many had their highest education level as being between standard eight (grade 8) and O-level.

As a result of the experience I had from MSR is that skilled workers were willing to do general work in cases where skilled jobs were unavailable. This was not the case with MP. All those that I interviewed preferred not to do any general work even if skilled jobs were missing. In fact some indicated that they would rather travel upcountry to see their family members instead.

Language and literacy
Over 95% of Kenyans can speak, read or write in Swahili. Swahili is Kenya’s National language. A good percentage (not known for now) can speak or write in English. This scenario was reflected in the MP group. 100% of those interviewed would speak in Swahili and some even in English. Speaking Swahili in Kenya means you can communicate with virtually every other Kenyan. What this means is that there is no communication barrier among members and even between them and their potential employers.

I tried to establish the groups’ literacy levels by requesting my interviewees to write down their personal details. The results indicated that majority of them, at above 98% could read and write. I asked them how they get to any location they have never been before and the answer was that they normally ask to
be picked by employers or get directed via their mobile phones. No one admitted to using a map as an aid to getting to a new location. (Note: Maps are rarely used in Kenya).

**Technology**

100% of all the respondents owned and used mobile phones. Majority said they used their phones to make and receive calls. At least two people had the equivalent of up to USD 1.2 worth of airtime in their phone at the time of the interview. Many of the phone calls made were said to be proactive and mainly used to enquire about potential jobs. Social calls, such as those to family and friends, were also part of the call list of the respondents. All those interviewed reported that they always receive calls from potential employers, friends and family members.

Out of fourteen people interviewed, one could not use SMS and this was a senior citizen aged 64. All interviewees admitted carrying their mobile phones with them all the time, except when they had taken it for charging.

Although most had heard, seen and even touched a computer, none of my respondents was computer literate. With the exception of one person, none of them had had email address account neither had they used any. No single responded had used the internet.

**Income and expenditure**

The main purpose of interrogating the job seekers balance sheet was to find out if their earnings matched their expenditure and if they make ends meet. More specifically if standing on the pavement day in day out is worth. The average daily earning was between USD 7.5 and USD 12.5, which amounts to between USD 225 and USD 335 a month.

Average daily commuter cost was said to be between USD 1 to USD 1.25, while weekly airtime cost was estimated as ranging between a minimum of USD 0.25 to a maximum of USD 18.75. The other major expenditure, rent averaged USD 21.25 per month. Given the worst case scenario, the total monthly expenditure, excluding food and healthcare, will come to about USD 112.25 with airtime expenditure contributing USD 75 (over 60% of rental, airtime and commuter expenditure).

The best case scenario, where one gets jobs throughout the month and earns over USD 335, would see a typical member of MP meet all his expenditure, including food, clothing and healthcare.

5. **General issues and Challenges**

Finally, I set out to enquire how men on the pavement felt about their current organization. I also requested them to discuss their challenges with me. This section outlines the findings of these issues.

*What are your thoughts about your current set up?*

Most respondents indicated that the current organization is the best available option. This was because they thought that there was no any other way of looking for a job. In fact most of them admitted that this was the only option they knew about. Asked if they didn’t regret those days of going back home
without any job, the answers were all closer to the idea that socializing with fellow job seekers would compensate for that. And after all, “what would one do?”, seemed to be the impression.

What if you guys were put on the internet?

This was a very exciting question. “Oooh Intaaanet intaaanet” was a response from one of the job seekers. “In fact when nation* came to photograph us and put us on the paper, we got many jobs” continued James**. Many others agreed with the idea of publicizing their waiting point and their work hence welcoming the idea of having online based matching and publicizing system.

Publicizing the work of MP might increase their hit rate. Many of them blame lack of publicity for poor turnout of clients. A number of them reported having heard passersby questioning what “they do” along the pavement everyday. This shows that if an awareness campaign is set up, it might improve their search.

Challenges

1. Lack of publicity - Indeed many passersby did not know what men on the pavement do. This reduces their chances of landing a job hence reducing their net income overall. Members find it difficult to develop large customer base. This is a problem related to lack of publicity. As a result it takes one a very long time to curve a market niche for themselves as they only get same customers (only those who know about the waiting point) all over again.

2. Crowded and congested waiting point – Indeed, MP don’t have any particular space set aside for them. They usually wait at the back of Moi Avenue Street where other activities (Matatu stage) take place.

3. Theft of their experience benefits. For example in some cases, middlemen request for quotations from MP, only to sell it or use it with other workers with no proceeds to MP

4. Undervaluing customers- Often, employers request that a worker be send to a certain place for a job. In such situations, workers mainly use their money as fare and even for airtime. In some cases where the employer and the worker disagree on the amount to be paid for the work, job seekers end up spending more money going back to their waiting point.

5. Wages fluctuation -This is mostly seen during low seasons.

6. Conmen and Presence of illegal labor brokers e.g. those that masquerade as potential employers and use job seekers details to acquire contracts which eventually don’t benefit the job seekers.

7. Political instability- When there is any political instability e.g. the case for 1997 and 2007/2008, employers freeze any developments and hence brings down any chances of getting jobs. During such situations, suspicions exists between employers and employees who may happen to be coming from different ethnic backgrounds
Benefits
- Training opportunities e.g. those provided by painting companies
- Moral and financial support from members during hard times
- Social support
- Proximity of the waiting point to Nairobi CBD

Other issues
I asked MP the longest time each of them has been out of a job and yet they were still coming to the site. The answer to this question was shocking as some of them had even spent up to six months without any job. On the other hand, it was interesting to note that some people had stayed in a job for a whole year without any disruptions.

Positive issues include the fact that some skilled people from the men on the pavement had been taken to work abroad in countries like Arabia and Congo. Others have worked in big organizations such as KAA, DOD etc.

6. Appendix

Appendix 1: Sample of individual interviewee information
This section summarizes talks with three interviewees. Their revelations reflect those of the other ten interviewees particularly with regard to technology and income.

1. Jotham Mirembo has had a mobile phone since the year 2001. His telephone number is +254 721 718 880. Jotham is 50 years of age and has been working as a painter and waiting at the Moi avenue street since 1985. His transport to and from the waiting point is approximately USD 0.625. He notes that he prefers to commute at non pick hours to save on transport costs. His mobile phone expense in terms of airtime is approximately USD 1 per day.

2. Michael Opondo, telephone number +254 724167 867. He is 50 years old and has worked as a painter since 1990 and since then, he has been coming to the site. Michael has had his mobile phone for seven (7) years and uses on average approximately USD 0.625 per day on as air time (credit) for his mobile phone. He also uses Short Message Service (SMS). His commuting expenses are about USD 1 per day.

3. Nebart Mbewa, telephone number +254 720 146 117. At 46, he continues to work as a painter, a job he has done since 1994. He did not receive any formal training but learnt to paint by experience. For the last 16 years, he has been coming to the Moi Avenue site to wait for his potential employers. Nebart has had a mobile phone since the year 2003. Like Michael, he has had for about seven years now. His commuting costs are lower compared to Michael’s as he sometimes prefers to walk to and from the city centre where he waits for potential employers to offer him jobs. His average expenditure on air time is around USD 1.0 per day.
As we were talking, one of my interviewees talked about a Korean based study which was done with MP on a study that was seeking to find out the best features of a mobile phone targeted at such users.

**Appendix 2: A Summary of data collected**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Tel No</th>
<th>SMS?</th>
<th>Owned</th>
<th>On pavement</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>How you acquired</th>
<th>Highest</th>
<th>Daily</th>
<th>Expeditu</th>
<th>Rent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Francis Oluoch</td>
<td>+254718873</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Samson Olindo</td>
<td>+254722927</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Electric</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Charles Okoth</td>
<td>+254720615</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Capenter</td>
<td>Youth polytechnic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Justus Ashiraka</td>
<td>+254721594</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Joel Otieno</td>
<td>+254724369</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Jotham Mirembo</td>
<td>+254 721 718</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>80 to 130</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Michael Opondo</td>
<td>+254 724 167</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20 to 350</td>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Nebart Mbewa</td>
<td>+254 720 146</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20 to 350</td>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Ouma Epoto (V. Chair)</td>
<td>0733606294</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10 to 150</td>
<td>Plumber</td>
<td>Youth polytechnic Form 2</td>
<td>160 to 200</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Ouma Ogelo</td>
<td>072056195</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>120 to 180</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Sammy Onyango</td>
<td>0733584251</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>120 to 180</td>
<td>800</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12 Mzee John (Not his name)</td>
<td>Has a phone</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience from Uganda b4 IDD Amin</td>
<td>100 to 120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 David</td>
<td>Has a phone</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Michael</td>
<td>0728969003</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>20 to 200</td>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100 to 300</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
** Names changed to hide identity

*Nation Newspaper, a leading daily newspaper publisher, tried to publish the work and site where men on the pavement wait. This is according to some interviewees. They said that during that time, many potential employers came to the site and hence brought about an improved placement rate.

# Part of 42 tribes that form the Kenyan population.