



The Exodus: Corona-Induced Urban-To-Rural Migration

By Dauti Kahura



Eric Oduor was your archetypal suave, tech savvy, cosmopolitan millennial with an urban mien - well, until several weeks ago, when he called from Sigomre village in Ugenya location, Siaya County, to announce that he had now fully relocated to his rural home from Nairobi city. At only 37, recently married in the last five years, with two young children and working as an IT consultant, Oduor was every millennial's dream: living in the fast lane, seeming to have been coping well with the city's corporate rat race. Then coronavirus crisis struck and his life changed completely.

"In the five months that the pandemic hit Kenya, all my four major corporate clients that I used to maintain and service and offer IT solutions to closed shop. In one fell swoop, I was declared redundant; I suddenly had no income. My clients empathised with me, but said there was little they could do. They also had been hit hard (I didn't need to be told), nobody saw the pandemic coming, nobody imagined it was here to stay. It has completely disrupted and disoriented our lives," said Oduor.

With a young family that depended on him, Oduor found himself in a bind. Yes, his wife was in gainful employment, but the family was not going to rely on his wife's salary and there was no the guarantee she would keep her job

“So I had to think doubly hard, what I wanted to do with my life, with my family in these very difficult coronavirus times and beyond. Even after the coronavirus is finally said to have been tamed, our lives will never be the same again, and life will never go back to normal as we used to know it.”

So, after thinking very hard, one evening, Oduor broke the tough news to his wife: “We can no longer sustain our lives in the city and this thing isn’t going away any time soon. We must brace for the future now. The sooner the better, and the only way to do that is by retracing our footsteps back home, because that is the only way we can salvage our lives. City life is proving to be unsustainable.” To his great relief and surprise too, his wife agreed with him and paved the way for him to go and conduct a reconnaissance mission in Sigomre village.

Oduor’s wife is thoroughly urbanised – trendy and younger...in every sense of the word, an urban sophisticate. Above all, she is from the Mt Kenya region, so one can understand why Oduor was a bit apprehensive as he broke the “sad” news to his wife.

“This COVID-19 has had a terrible impact on marriages. It has led some marriages to break up, so you can imagine what difficulties mixed marriages like mine could be going through. My wife agreed with me that our lives’ and our children’s future lay not in the big city, but ultimately in a place where we can develop to our taste and we can always be sure whatever the disruption, we could always absorb it because we’re truly at home,” said a relieved Oduor.

To his great surprise, it was not only he who was relieved: “My father was worried about this new mysterious disease that was sweeping the world like a mystical wave and which had arrived in the country and was claiming peoples’ lives in the city. In a roundabout way, he suggested to me to temporarily relocate the family and bring it home. In a way, many rural folks, including my parents, honestly believe the coronavirus is domiciled in the city. When it broke, my father told me leave and come back home.”

As if that was not enough of a worry, said Oduor, when he told his father that his consultancy jobs had actually dried up, his father became really concerned. “Ordinarily, it’s we children who normally take care of our folks in their rural home. Now my parents were sending foodstuff to my family to beef up our sustenance. He would send beans, dry maize, millet and posho-mill flour. When I went to see him to tell him I was moving my family back home, he was overjoyed. He said, ‘Look my son, at the very least, there’s plenty of food and shelter here. The children aren’t going to school until next year. It will give you time to think about what you would like to do here.’”

Oduor’s father farms maize, keeps chickens, sheep and goats, and has dairy cows for milk,. After leaving the city himself five years ago for good, he never looked back. “In those five years, my father, who regularly came to the city, has only spent two nights in town since he left,” said Oduor. “He would come on the night bus, spend the whole day doing his *biasharas* and in the evening, he would be on the night bus again heading home. I couldn’t persuade him to spend the night here. My father had always told me Nairobi is a place where people go to look for employment. Once that employment is over, you pack your things and return home where you came from.”

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With his savings, Oduor is exploring several options: He had already built a two-bedroomed house on his piece of land given to him by his father, so, like his father said, food and shelter are not a problem. “If taken seriously and done well, agriculture is worth the risk because people will always eat. My father has become a full-time farmer and it’s been keeping him going. I’d like to take it

further and see what will come of it, even as I explore other possibilities,” averred Oduor. That doesn’t mean that I will no longer be coming to the city. All it means is that the city has ceased to be the centre of our family’s life.”

Colonial constructions

Oduor could be the exception rather than the rule: It is unlikely that the majority of millennials will be migrating to their rural homes in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, but he is certainly an aberration that might as well explain the extent to which disruptions, such as a global pandemic or even an economic meltdown, can lead people in cities to reevaluate their lives and consider their options.

Economist David Ndii remarked once that in Africa, people travel to and live light in the metropolis because many cities in Africa were not built with the natives in mind. Cities have remained colonial constructions alien to the indigenous people. The great lesson for many people then has always been that in the cities, you must always have a way out of a calamity or a disruption.

But really, it is because Africans never consider cities to be their proper dwellings? Cities are still transient places for a majority of Africans. Many African cities were built by and for the colonialists, who accepted indigenous people only as indentured or migrant labour. If you did not have a pass to enter the city, or work there, you would be arrested and fined.

To date many people who live in cities have one foot there, the other one in a rural area where their ancestors hailed from and what they call home. The idea of a city to many Africans, young and old, has always been a temporary one. Their annual exodus from the city to their respective rural homes during the Easter holiday and more so during the Christmas festive season explains this notion of the reverse urban-rural migration. It also explains, why rural areas become the refuge of city dwellers running away from city calamities and commotions be they, for instance the 1982 failed coup, the 1998 US embassy bombing in Nairobi, the general elections held after every five year cycle, and especially after the disputed presidential elections of 2007 that led to an explosion of violence in the Rift Valley region.

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Way before the coronavirus crisis came to bear on us, a millennial who owned an electronics shop at the famous Nyamakima area relocated back home to Murang’a County in 2018 after it become untenable to run his erstwhile lucrative business. “With the government’s crackdown on counterfeit goods, which we used to import from China, and the subsequent hoarding of our goods at the government warehouses in Industrial Area, I lost so much money, as did many other traders, that I decided to just leave Nairobi and go home. *Kaba kuinoka*. I’m better off in my rural home,” said the trader.

No safety nets

“When President Uhuru Kenyatta reviewed the cessation of movement between counties on July 7, 2020, it was to allow people in Nairobi to leave town and transport their families back to their rural areas,” alleged a senior civil servant. “We (the government), knew people were suffering in the city. Many had lost their jobs, they couldn’t pay their rents, they couldn’t feed their children. Life had truly become a burden. It was going to be just a matter of time before the situation possibly blew out

of hand. The government had to choose between facing a boiling agitation from the people, who would soon take it no more, or risk the very same people transporting coronavirus to the rural areas. Whichever option it took, it was the devil's alternative."

Many of these people worked as casual labourers, drivers or housekeepers or as waiters or waitresses in bars, restaurants and hotels. Or in the informal sector as hawkers, street vendors and merchandise traders. I know this because I am in a group that has been pooling resources to buy food for families that live where we grew up in Eastlands. With no gainful employment, yet mounting bills to pay, and no safety nets to fall back on as they would in their rural homes, many of these people just waited for the government to reconsider cessation so that they could take their families to their rural areas.

One of the big factors that drove Oduor out of Nairobi is the fact that he continued to pay rent for five months for a house he couldn't call home and without an income. "That is money I can invest in a small project in the rural area," he explained.

So that is why a family in Kawangware, after exhausting its reserves, went to a merchandise shop that sells and accepts second-hand goods and hawked their furniture in return for cash, which it would use to pay for transport for the long journey to western Kenya. Kawangware is a sprawling peri-urban area that was originally inhabited by the Kikuyu, but which is now dominated by Kenyans from the western region. The odd jobs the man of the house was doing had dissipated. With several mouths to feed, the man had no choice but to retrace his footsteps to his rural home.

A visit to "Machakos" Country Bus Station in downtown Nairobi revealed that people were travelling back home in droves, and accompanied by hordes of children and household goods - from wooden beds and mattresses to sofa sets and utensils. It was evident that many were not planning to return to the city in a hurry, if they would return at all. The many travellers I spoke to said life in the city had become unbearable and it was time to go back to their roots. "*Shule zilifungwa, hakuna kazi tunafanya nini huku?*" Schools have been closed, there's no work, what are we doing in the city?

"Because of the curfew, buses are only leaving in the mornings," explained Vincent Musa, one of the groundsmen at the station, which serves buses that travel all over upcountry. To possibly tame the spread of coronavirus, the government also instituted a curfew - first the curfew was between 5am - 7pm, later on the president revised it to 5am - 9pm. "Everyday buses have been leaving here between 6am - 10am in order to beat the curfew at 9pm. Many of the destinations of these buses take an average of seven to eight hours. Most of the people who have been travelling are women and children. Since the children are not going to school, it is pointless to keep them in Nairobi."

"It is easier for the man to survive alone in the city," said a man who was accompanied by his wife and children. "*Wacha waende nyumbani, mimi nitang'ang'ana na maisha hapa Nairobi.*" I'm taking my family home, I will return to deal with the harsh city life.

Musa named for me nearly all the destinations that the people were travelling to: Ahero, Boro, Bungoma, Eldoret, Cheptais Chwele, Homa Bay, Kadel, Katito, Kendu Bay, Kimilili, Kisumu, Kisii, Kitale, Koguta, Luanda, Malaba, Maseno, Matunda, Moi's Bridge, Mbita, Muhoroni, Ng'iya, Nyandorera, Olare, Rwambwa, Siaya, Urugu, Wagai and Webuye.

While at the station, I counted seven different bus companies that ferried people home: Climax Coaches, Eldoret Express, Greenline, Nairobi Bus Union, Nyar Ugenya and Nyamira Express. After coronavirus set in, many of these buses were grounded, and even though the lifting of the cessation had given the owners some reprieve, many are still grounded. "The bus capacity had been reduced. A bus that carried 67 passengers has now been restricted to 40 only. This reduction of passengers

has meant that fares have had to be doubled,” said Musa.

Many of the fares to western Kenya ranged from between Sh600 and Sh800 before the pandemic. Now they are charging Sh1,400 or above to all destinations in Nyanza, Kisii and Transzoia. One bus to Kitale charges Sh1,750.

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Majiwa, the supervisor told me the pandemic had been a wake-up call for many Kenyans. “Nairobi has never been a domicile for anybody - permanent or otherwise. I'm here because I still have work. The day they tell me I'm redundant, I'll pack my things and head home. In Nairobi, you pay for everything, including going for ablution. In the rural area, food is plenty and free, children can never lack anything to eat. That's why people are taking their children back home. Every morning 25 buses have been leaving here heading to western Kenya, packed with women and their children”.

There has been another reason why many parents from western Kenya living in Nairobi have been transporting their children back home in great numbers. “Once the government announced that schools will not reopen till January next year, circumcision rites for boys, which usually are conducted in the month of August and December, started early in July,” said Musa. “And these rites will go on till December non-stop. *Wacha watoto watengenezwe.*” Let the boys get initiated now that they are not going to school. Circumcision for boys, especially among the Bukusu people who live in Bungoma, Kitale and around Mt Elgon area, is an elaborate affair.

Not since the scare of the terrorists' bomb at the former US embassy, then located at the corner of Haile Selassie Avenue and Moi Avenue in Nairobi, has there been such a scare leading people to migrate to their rural homes. While the scale of the Al Qaeda bombing had never been witnessed before in Nairobi, it nonetheless never took people's jobs, or cumulatively threatened their lives. People rightly reasoned that if they escaped the city to their rural homes, they would be safe

The current coronavirus scare is compounded by the fact that normal life has been completely disrupted, so there is a possibility that those leaving might never return. There is also the issue of people believing that COVID-19 is basically a city disease.

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