Kennedy “JJ” Chindi is a popular man. In the three days I spend shadowing him during his rounds as a community organiser for the Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC), none of our conversations are uninterrupted. While we are walking through the informal settlement, people of all ages and backgrounds come up to him just to say hello and let him know how they’re doing. In his small shared office at the centre, at least five people interrupt our conversation with greetings, requests for assistance or simply to say, “Hey JJ, I’m around”. He makes time for all of them, never too busy for a friendly word or a gentle encouragement, even for the dishevelled, unkempt man reeking of chang’aa that he stealthily tries to shield me from by standing between us.

JJ’s popularity stems from his status as one of Mathare’s longest-serving community organisers. Mathare is one of the oldest informal settlements in Kenya, predating independence, and one of the most densely populated parts of the country. Like other informal settlements in the city, it has an unfortunate history of violence - clashes between gangs are common but so is violent policing. According to MSJC, between 2013 and 2016, the police killed 800 young people in Mathare. During the 2008 post-election violence, Human Rights Watch recorded an incident in which the police rounded up 34 young men and shot them all at point blank range. Every time Kenya’s politics
bubbles over, Mathare burns.

But Mathare is also a site of tremendous hope and resilience, as JJ himself proves. Over the last 30 years, he has taken up the cause of justice in the informal settlement that has become increasingly violent and unliveable for its largely youthful population. Extra-judicial killings by the police are common – between 2015 and 2016 MSJC documented at least 84 killings by the police in the settlement, down from a high of 126 the previous year, which makes Mathare the site of the highest concentration of killings in the country. These numbers were recorded before the 2017 election violence in which many more died. He believes that the only reason why the numbers are going down is because for the first time someone is really watching and counting the dead.

JJ got his nickname from the popular Nigerian footballer JJ Okocha because he owes much of his fame to the years he played football with a local team. If you’re as good as JJ was in the home of the legendary Mathare United, football can be both a path out of the settlement and a guarantee of local fame. JJ could have used his fame to do something else but he chose to use it to try and make a difference. For many years, he collaborated with other colleagues – Stephen Mwangi, Wanqui Kimari, Rahma Wako and Gacheke Gachibi – and organisations like Peace Brigades International to help resolve individual cases of injustice. In 2015, the group formalised their collaboration as MSJC.

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“We started in Kiamako,” he says, “near the big goat slaughterhouse, where the residents are mostly people from the northern counties. They have a major issue with trafficking of underage kids from Ethiopia and early marriages. We would advocate against that and report cases to the police station and things like that.”

Mama Rahma, one of JJ’s earliest allies, is a Borana grandmother whose oldest grandchild is just about to finish high school. She says little, preferring to observe, but their friendship is apparent. Together, they helped protect innumerable victims of trafficking brought to the slaughterhouse to work jobs even locals wouldn’t touch – pointing them to safe houses and shelters in the settlement.

Earlier this year, JJ won the Public Popular Vote at the Human Rights Defender’s Award and that solidified his and the centre’s reputation as a cornerstone for human rights advocacy not just in Mathare, but across the country. When he walks through the settlement, people come up to him and congratulate him and he is visibly pleased. “After so many years of working at the grassroots it feels good to be acknowledged, especially to win the Popular Public vote,” he beams. “It means people appreciate the work that we’re doing. It gives us courage”.

MSJC has programmes on youth empowerment, arts and culture, reproductive health rights and political accountability and runs a safe space for Mathare’s children that they’re hoping to expand with a library and a well-resourced sports and arts programme. They cleared a dumping site outside their office and planted a community garden so that locals could have a place to sit as part of their “Greening Mathare” initiative.

But MSJC is best-known for its activism against extra-judicial executions by the police. “We started documenting it because people wouldn’t believe it was happening,” JJ says. From his perspective, before MSJC began publicly documenting and shaming the police for the violence, the situation was only getting worse. “The number of young men dying in Mathare was increasing so much. In a day
you could get six young guys, or even ten young guys being killed by the police. And they were never caught at the scene of the crime. They were always just walking on the street or pulled out of their houses and taken to be killed.”

For JJ, shifting towards advocacy around this issue was a natural fit. He knew first-hand what it meant to be young and poor in Mathare, and because of his profile, people already brought cases to him hoping he could help. “JJ already had much of the information,” says Wangui Kimari, a graduate student and part of the core of six, who volunteers as a researcher and coordinator at the centre. “It was just a question of turning the raw information that he had into something a little more structured, especially so we could take it to officials like IPOA [the Independent Policing Oversight Authority].” To this end, Kimari and other volunteers allowed local and international researchers working in Mathare to use the centre as a base for their work in exchange for supporting the preparation of key documents pertaining to their cases.

This exercise led to the centre’s first high profile publication called “Who is Next?” In the report, the centre presented aggregate statistics and highlighted specific narratives of extra-judicial executions in Mathare. The document made waves in Nairobi’s often detached human rights community for many good reasons. In a first for this highly fragmented and professionalised human rights advocacy space, it was a lateral collaboration between grassroots human rights defenders across the city’s informal settlements. “Even the big organisations joined us because for the first time, in 2016, one of their own, Willie Kimani, was targeted [for execution],” JJ points out. Kimani, a lawyer with the International Justice Mission (IJM), his client and their driver were kidnapped and killed while pursuing a case of blackmail against a police officer. Five policemen are currently on trial for the murders.

The centre identified at least eight police officers known in the community who were involved in repeated extra-judicial executions. The average age of those executed was 20, but the youngest was only 13 years-old. Most of those killed were executed at close range – some in the process of surrendering, like the two captured in the video that went viral.

The “Who is Next?” report was also the first time that a human rights report had a preface written in Sheng’ rather than institutional English or Kiswahili. “It was a deliberate choice,” says Kimari. “We wanted people of Mathare to read it and take ownership of it.” The report also had a notably confrontational style. Instead of attempting to appease institutions by appealing to the non-existent mechanisms that frustrates MSJC everyday, it called out these failures and pointed out the ways in which they left Mathare’s people vulnerable.

Significantly, the cover image on the report is a still from a video that went viral in which a local police officer, Rashid, well known for targeting young men accused of crimes, shoots two young men in the head while a large crowd looks on. The disturbing video triggered a polarising response where many Nairobians argued that the police were right to execute “thugs” who terrorise their neighbourhoods. For MSJC, it was a reminder of how much work needed to be done to remind Kenyans that the young men in Mathare are human beings too. They chose the photo to confront the police and the public directly for what they literally did that day and what they figuratively do on other days – look on while the state takes away Mathare’s young people.

The main findings of the report are chilling. The centre identified at least eight police officers known in the community who were involved in repeated extra-judicial executions. The average age of those executed was 20, but the youngest was only 13 years-old. Most of those killed were executed at close
range – some in the process of surrendering, like the two captured in the video that went viral. The report also alleges a form of systematic cover-up – young men are killed in a handful of known locations and almost always “in possession of a home-made gun”.

As expected, there was a major response. The human rights community in Nairobi was moved into action in an unprecedented way – there has been a heightened level of collaboration and coordination on the issue since the report was launched. Many news outlets covered the launch, thus breaking the silence on extra-judicial executions in informal settlements.

“We noticed after the report was launched that Rashid kept coming around more often, asking for me by name,” says JJ. I ask if that makes him afraid. “I’m afraid a lot of the time,” he admits. He has reason to be so; Steve Mwangi, the administrative coordinator at MSJC, was arrested twice in one week and was threatened with the same fate as Willy Kimani. “When we launched the report and the policeman started hovering around here, it gave me such anxiety.” But JJ’s faith and his networks, especially the rest of the team at the centre, give him courage at times like this.

No one at MSJC is insensitive to the risks of organising against the police in such a visible way. It speaks to their dedication that all the staff members are volunteers even while Nairobi’s cost of living soars. Maria Mutauta, their social media volunteer, is unequivocal: “If I die for the work, I die for it,” she says unflinchingly. Mutaula is not a resident of Mathare – she goes to the centre every day because the other volunteers inspire her and make her hopeful that Kenya can be better than it currently is. “I love that feeling of hope,” she says.

“They love their press conferences and their meetings in hotels,” says JJ, “but when it’s a protest – when it’s time to get teargassed – we the people from the grassroots are the ones who show up.”

Nairobi’s fairly rigid class lines are held in place by the challenges of travelling from one part of the city to the other, and people like Mutaula who cross them regularly by choice are unusual. For the most part, while residents in informal settlements are increasingly organising, centres like MSJC struggle to get the attention of Nairobi’s middle-class communities and, until recently, the human rights organisations nestled in the city’s leafy suburbs. “Mainstream organisations like the big cases like Willy Kimani or Jacob Juma (a controversial businessman murdered allegedly with the connivance of state agents in May 2016),” says JJ. “But it’s hard to get them to pay attention to the small individual cases that we deal with.”

Kimari’s assessment is bleaker. “The middle class in Kenya is a useless demographic,” she notes, fully aware that she is part of that demographic. “We get unexpected allies from time to time – like the well-known constitutional lawyer who pays our rent or individual representatives of various organisations. But for the most part, the mainstream organisations are embarrassed because we are able to do work that they can’t do.” This is symbolic of a growing chasm between the formal human rights network in Kenya and the grassroots organisers that bring them the stories they need to prove their efficacy.

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JJ isn’t the only one alarmed by the widening gap between national and international human rights organisations and those in informal settlements; it is a common complaint amongst the MSJC team. Part of this gap can be attributed to geography. Nairobi is an economically segregated town and no major human rights organisation has its offices in working-class or poor neighbourhoods of the city.
It takes two matatus and several minutes of walking to get from the MSJC office in Mathare to the offices of the national human rights groups in Kilimani, Kileleshwa or Karen. But part of it is also wilful decisions not to invest in networks and collaborations in places like Mathare. “What if instead of spending their money renting rooms in five-star hotels for their press conferences they sent some of that money here so we can buy water for our toilets?” wonders Kimari.

This doctrine of self-organising has also changed the power dynamics between the grassroots groups and the mainstream human rights organisations. It is building confidence in the grassroots organisers to demand different terms of engagement.

In the meantime, MSJC continues to be an inspiration, especially in other informal settlements. “It has spread, we now have the Dandora Youth Network. In Kayole, there’s the Kayole Social Justice Centre. In Kangemi, there’s one – all of these are inspired by MSJC, which showed that we at the grassroots can also form organisations that can make a difference.”

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“Before, they used to use us to rubber stamp their work,” JJ says, “but now that we are more organised, they have to approach us as full partners and they are starting to take up our issues too.”

For all their successes, MSJC faces the same challenges that any other community-led group in the world faces, funding key amongst them. “Money is important,” notes Kimari, “We have to pay for utilities, buy meals for some of our volunteers and even buy water for the toilets because there’s no running water in the building.” Most of their work is funded by the research collaborations they set up with local and international researchers working in Mathare. They have long-running partnerships with organisations like Peace Brigades International and the Katiba Institute. Occasionally, they are included in projects with other organisations. But they’re still just getting by. “We need more well-wishers to help us grow,” JJ says, “to cover our overheads like administration, Internet and other things – and maybe one day to pay our volunteers a small honorarium.”

These challenges complicate the work but the team moves forward in confidence because they have the greatest asset of all – support from the community. “We deliver for them,” JJ says. “We help them organise in a way that makes sure that people see them. We solve their problems like they are our own. They know that we are part of them and that’s why when you see me walking through the streets they always stop and say hello.”

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