

# The children of Korogocho

When we think of a slum, images of misery often immediately come to mind. But to understand Korogocho, you have to imagine a very specific place: Dandora, one of Africa's largest open dumps, which borders directly on the slum.

It is a huge, steaming area where tons of waste are dumped every day. The most shocking thing about it is that up to 60 percent of the children from Korogocho regularly go there to search through the garbage for something they can sell—often the only source of income for their families.

## Searching for food in the garbage

But that's not all. In “Boma,” as this gigantic garbage dump is called by the locals, it's also about food. It's about food, about survival. One of the slum dwellers I was there with told me, “This is where I ate the first hamburger of my life,” and smiled. “It was delicious, it tasted really good.”

This is the starting point, the backdrop against which life here unfolds – a place that for many symbolizes the end of hope.

“Where miracles happen”

But then there is this other side of Korogocho, the third-largest slum in Kenya's capital, Nairobi. Ironically, this place, whose name means ‘chaos’ or “confusion” in the Kikuyu language, has earned itself a surprising reputation.

Thomas Schwarz describes it as the “slum where miracles happen.” Schwarz, a journalist and author, describes these miracles not as “supernatural events” but as “the result of human resilience” driven by the residents of Korogocho themselves. Schwarz has visited the slum countless times since 2007.

## Four surprising lessons from Korogocho

This article highlights four of the most surprising and powerful lessons we can learn from the impressive initiatives growing in the heart of Korogocho. They tell a story not of despair, but of initiative, ingenuity, and a deep belief that change is possible.

In Korogocho, electricity is much more than just a convenience—it is a fundamental building block for any kind of future. When night falls, every alleyway becomes a zone of uncertainty, and the risk of muggings and violence increases.

For countless children, the school day ends abruptly because without light, it is impossible to do homework or study for exams. The local economy also suffocates in the darkness: a barber cannot use his hair clippers, a seamstress cannot use her sewing machine. Not to mention the sudden need for help in an emergency.

## No electricity, no prospects

In an attempt to escape this shortage, many residents resort to improvised, illegal power connections. These pose a constant danger and repeatedly lead to fires and fatal electric shocks. But there is a cruel economic trap hidden here: these unsafe connections often cost many times more than the official supply.

At the same time, purchasing a safe alternative such as a solar lamp is unaffordable for most families. This vicious circle cements poverty. The situation highlights a brutal truth: **where there is no energy, there is often no future.**

This lesson from Korogocho forces us to redefine our perception of basic services. **A simple light bulb is not a luxury** here, but a crucial factor that determines education, safety, and the possibility of a self-determined life.

The most important tool for change: not money, but a soccer ball

Over 15 years ago, Hamilton Ayiera Nyanga, a young man from Korogocho, had an idea. He had just played for Kenya in the Homeless World Cup and came back with 1,500 euros in prize money – a fortune in an environment where daily earnings are often less than two euros. Instead of using the money for himself, he founded the [Ayiera Initiative](#). His credo, written on pieces of paper on wooden fences: “A ball can change slums.”

This idea sparked an entire movement. Hamilton knew that soccer attracts young people like a magnet. But for him, it was never just a game. It was a tool for peacemaking (“conflict prevention”) that brought hostile ethnic groups such as the Luo and Kikuyu and others together in joint teams. It was a conscious alternative to a life on the streets, threatened by crime, drug abuse, and violence.

They help themselves first

Today, many are following this example. Initiatives such as the **Mashinani League** and [Ted's Community Hub](#) use sport to build community. The coaches become mentors, trusted confidants. They create a safe space where young people “can talk about things they may not be able or willing to discuss at home.”

Soccer often serves as a “bait,” a magnet, a motivation. At Ted's Hub, for example, it's not just about playing soccer. Every Saturday, hundreds of children receive a hot meal and have access to a small library. Soccer opens the door to education and social support. Julius Tamree started the Mashinani League with friends when he was only 17 years old – without any outside help. He was almost still a child.

He sums up the spirit of these movements in one simple sentence: **“I love my hood”**, which in their own language, Swahili, means “Ya mtaa!”. And of course, there is also a piece of music – [including a video](#).

Trash becomes the future: the silent heroes of the neighborhood

The story of how the **Wakulima Youth Group** came into being is perhaps the most impressive lesson to be learned from Korogocho. It all started with a very simple idea. A young woman of perhaps 16 or 17 suggested to her friends that they “do something instead of just hanging around.” Their first action: they cleaned up a dirty corridor between the corrugated iron huts.

They also run a small chicken project to supply the community with eggs. And, of course, to earn some money – which they can then reinvest in their project.

In an environment dominated by the neighboring Dandora garbage mountain, this was an act of defiance. It was a refusal to be defined by dirt and disorder. This small spark sparked a movement. Without any external start-up assistance, the group began transforming neglected areas that served as garbage dumps into small green spaces.

They developed a sustainable model: they collect trash from the streets, such as plastic and metal, clean it, and sell it to buy tools with the proceeds. They also run a small chicken project to supply the community with eggs. And, of course, to sell some of them. This earns them money, which they can then invest in their project.

Their visible actions have fundamentally changed the perception of these children and young people. Whereas they may have been considered idle or even potential troublemakers in the past, they are now role models. Their story impressively demonstrates that the most effective change happens when people take responsibility for their immediate environment themselves – and create a future out of garbage.

The most effective solutions grow from the bottom up, not from the top down

Summarizing the lessons learned from Korogocho, one overarching insight emerges: genuine and sustainable development is driven by the residents themselves. The countless small initiatives – one could call them “grassroots NGOs” Or, to use business jargon, NGO “start-ups” – radically challenge the traditional model of development aid, in which solutions are designed in distant conference rooms.

These local organizations arise from a deep, lived understanding of the actual needs of the community. They are **not the result of remote analysis**, but rather the response to real, everyday challenges. Driven by a strong sense of community and an **unconditional will to change**, they demonstrate an effectiveness that external programs often find difficult to achieve. The voices of the residents themselves confirm this impact most clearly.

### The miracles of Korogocho

These “miracles” of Korogocho are not supernatural events. They are the result of human resilience, ingenuity, and collective action in the face of overwhelming adversity. The stories of a soccer ball that brings peace, a light bulb that enables education, and a group of young people who transform a garbage dump into a garden are powerful testimonies to what is possible when people take matters into their own hands.

The experiences from this slum raise a fundamental, thought-provoking question that concerns us all: “Are we always looking in the right direction when searching for solutions?” Perhaps the example of Korogocho challenges us to rethink our ideas about development—away from external interventions and toward strengthening the incredible power that lies within the communities themselves.

Of course, this conclusion does not mean that we in the wealthy parts of the world should not support them (anymore). On the contrary: such self-help initiatives deserve our support. Donations are invested in chickens or in a child so that they can attend school. The “miracle of Korogocho” is extremely contagious ...