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URBAN SAFETY, MIGRATION AND CLIMATE
CHANGE AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE SOMALI
COMMUNITY IN EASTLEIGH, NAIROBI

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SUMMARY

Eastleigh is a vibrant neighbourhood in Nairobi with a large Somali population, and is popularly known as 'Little Mogadishu'. Although it is one of the most prosperous business centres in the Kenyan capital, Eastleigh suffers from long-standing urban security problems related to human trafficking, land grabbing, gang violence and drug trafficking. Historically, relations between the police and the Somali community have been strained by allegations of criminality (often echoed by political figures) linked to money laundering, smuggling and extremist activity.

Some of these urban security issues may be exacerbated by climate change. Nairobi is one of many cities sought out by Somali migrants and refugees, some displaced by climate-related disruption. And Eastleigh, with its large Somali community, tends to be a go-to area. But human traffickers and smugglers are also drawn to the neighbourhood due to the ease with which they can collude with corrupt public officials and hotel staff, enabling them to obtain falsified documents and house undocumented migrants and women for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

This policy brief aims to increase understanding of the urban safety issues that affect the Somali community in Eastleigh, particularly those related to organized crime. These challenges include climate change as a risk multiplier – for example, as a push factor for migration from rural areas of Somalia and northern Kenya.

The paper is informed by roundtable discussions that were held between November 2025 and February 2026 as part of the Shared Security Dialogues project, funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The project's primary goal was to bridge the trust gap between groups who rarely discuss these issues and are often at odds with each other, and encourage them to debate how best to achieve urban safety. The groups involved were law enforcement and government representatives on the one hand, and members of Eastleigh's civil society, including community-based organizations, residents and members of the Somali refugee and recent migrant communities, on the other. The policy brief also draws on interviews in Nairobi with members of community-based organizations, activists, business owners, government officials, police officers and general residents of Eastleigh, including refugees. The interviews are anonymized to minimize risks to the interlocutors.

The main cross-cutting finding is that different illegal markets are linked and reinforce one another in a vicious cycle in Eastleigh. For instance, many dialogue participants and interviewees reported document forgery as a major challenge, which aids other types of crime. For example, it facilitates the work of human trafficking and smuggling networks, as they can pay to have foreign nationals stay in or, more frequently, pass through Nairobi.

The Eastleigh district, one of Nairobi's most prosperous business centres, suffers from a multitude of urban security problems. © Patrick Meinhardt/ Bloomberg via Getty Images



A detailed set of recommendations that draw on this research and the Shared Security Dialogues is provided in an accompanying document to this policy brief, the Shared Security Pact. In February 2026, these recommendations were discussed and validated in a final dialogue between civil society members and government officials. The policy recommendations in the Shared Security Pact come directly from the communities and state representatives at the dialogues. By bringing these disparate groups together to discuss how best to achieve urban safety, the project encouraged community-led coproduction of suggestions for urban safety strategies and programmes. The aim of these recommendations is to guide civil society, community members and government towards a more comprehensive response to urban security for the Somali community in Eastleigh.

Key points

- A significant grievance among the Somali community in Eastleigh is corruption and bribery linked to the police. Initiatives such as Nyumba Kumi – a community policing model – have aimed to improve relations between migrants and the police, but tensions remain.¹
- There is a high inward migration into Eastleigh of rural Somalis fleeing conflict and climate change-related disruption.² This has created the conditions for human smuggling, particularly to South Africa; for the sexual exploitation of vulnerable migrant women;³ and for the kidnapping for ransom in Libya of young Somali migrants hoping to travel to Europe.⁴
- Police raids have uncovered document forgers in Eastleigh and officials strongly suspect that they cooperate with transnational human smuggling networks to traffic migrants through Nairobi. Refugees pay bribes to obtain fraudulent Kenyan identity documents and passports.⁵ The forgers include local authorities, police chiefs, registrars, clerks, technicians and local businesspeople.⁶
- The flow of migrants and refugees into Eastleigh has driven up demand for land and housing, which has led to low-income tenants being evicted forcibly in the middle of the night to make way for profitable residential buildings or hotels.⁷ These land grabs are facilitated by local authorities, including the local government, despite objections and court processes around alleged breaches of planning, zoning or building regulations.
- Security agencies have identified 126 criminal groups in the city,⁸ and these are sometimes used by politicians to intimidate opponents at election time.⁹ The largest gang structure in Eastleigh is Super Power, which extorts protection money from public transport drivers and drivers of waste-disposal trucks.¹⁰ Other gangs use the multimillion-dollar khat industry to anchor illicit drug trade and the recruitment of drug traffickers within Nairobi.



INTRODUCTION

The Eastleigh area of Nairobi houses the city's largest concentration of Somalis – both Kenyan nationals who are ethnic Somalis and a large migrant community from Somalia itself. It is popularly called 'Little Mogadishu'. Eastleigh is also a neighbourhood of contrasts: one of the most prosperous business centres in Kenya's capital, yet with a large low-income population; a contributor to an estimated 30% of all Nairobi County taxes,¹¹ and a hotspot for street crime; one of the country's most expensive real-estate markets, and a popular site for Somali refugees fleeing instability and the effects of climate change. Nairobi County government itself acknowledges that many of the migrants and refugees settling in areas such as Eastleigh face 'overstretched social services', 'livelihood insecurity' and a 'lack of a coherent institutional structure' to protect refugees.¹²

Whereas local and national governments, together with external partners, have worked to address these challenges – producing, for example, a Nairobi County Refugee Integration Strategy and contributing to a national Refugee Act in 2021 – a fundamental gap in policies and civil society action is public security, particularly regarding crime.¹³ The lack of studies on the vulnerability of migrants, refugees and long-time residents of Eastleigh to organized crime and violent actors undermines the ability of governments (local and national) and civil society to respond effectively.

The crime risks that affect Somali migrant and refugee communities in Nairobi include transnational human trafficking, land grabbing and gang violence.¹⁴ During the height of the 'war on terror', and the attack by Somalia-based terrorist group al-Shabaab on Nairobi's Westgate Mall in 2013,¹⁵ attention to security issues was acute. But the result for Eastleigh has mainly been repressive policing responses and stigmatization.

This outcome is particularly problematic because the migrants and refugees who come to Eastleigh are fleeing difficult conditions, which include climate events that disrupt rural livelihoods in Somalia and force movement into cities, such as Nairobi. However, this makes Eastleigh an important site for research to understand and respond to the risk-multiplying effects of climate change on migration from fragile settings such as Somalia.

Additionally, Eastleigh provides a valuable case study of the specific vulnerabilities of urban refugees and migrants, particularly because certain types of organized crime and gangs tend to be inherently urban phenomena tied to dense and poorly patrolled areas, of which there are many in Nairobi.¹⁶ The World Bank estimates that more than half of the global displaced population lives in urban areas.¹⁷ This is the case with displaced Somali communities. Rural populations in Somalia are increasingly fleeing the dual impact of conflict and loss of livelihoods as a result of climate change, and are moving to cities.¹⁸



Many of the migrants and refugees settling in Eastleigh face overstretched services, including water scarcity, with tankers often the only reliable source of water. *Photo: GI-TOC*

As climate-driven displacement accelerates and urban areas absorb ever-greater numbers of refugees and migrants, it is increasingly important to understand and address the organized crime dynamics affecting these communities. This policy brief examines the intersecting risks facing Eastleigh's Somali community, setting out concrete steps towards safer and more just urban governance. Together with the accompanying Shared Security Pact, it provides the foundation for a meaningful response.



VULNERABILITIES AND STATE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Despite the important contribution that the Somali-majority Eastleigh makes to Nairobi's economic development, residents' lives there are shaped by popular prejudices, which associate the area with crime and terrorism, and by a history of state neglect. Relations between the Somali community and the Kenyan state, particularly the police, have been historically tumultuous, involving national security fears of violent radicalization and grievances from the Somali community about police harassment and hostility towards refugees.¹⁹

Refugees and recent migrants

Urban safety and refugee integration are intertwined in the Eastleigh context, in that the marginalization of refugee communities shapes their vulnerability to organized crime. Up to the late 1980s, refugees in Kenya benefited from a relatively relaxed state approach, being able to move freely to and from cities and apply for work permits.²⁰ However, political crises in neighbouring countries, especially the 1991 collapse of the Somali state, caused the number of refugees in Kenya to balloon from 12 000 in 1988 to 400 000 by 1992 – leading to a policy that constrained the movement of refugees to camps.²¹ This was accompanied by increasingly strict limitations on refugees' labour and residential options in cities, which only made them more vulnerable. Despite the restrictions on urban living, many refugees (in Kenya and in other countries with similar policies) continued to move to cities in search of work, but policies such as Kenya's undermined their ability to obtain documentation (including work permits) and pursue jobs in the formal sector.²²

In recent years, national policies have changed significantly. The new Refugee Act, adopted in 2021, moved 'away from a camp-centric model in which refugees rely on humanitarian aid and towards a model of local integration'.²³ It removed the limitations on refugees' movement to and from cities and allowed them to get work permits.²⁴ In practice, however, most refugees' experience in Nairobi continues to be marred by stigma and state neglect in many ways. Major implementation problems undermine their ability to integrate and, crucially, to work. To obtain a work permit, for example, refugees must provide documents issued by the National Registration Bureau (NRB), but many refugees' details are not recorded by the NRB, which creates a bureaucratic hurdle.²⁵ This difficulty is compounded by the burden on employers, in order to employ foreign nationals, to confirm that the

required skills are not available locally, which is an unrealistic standard for many refugees.²⁶ These issues have meant that historical socio-economic challenges remain.

One relatively new source of potential solutions to help refugees and migrants in Kenyan cities is the devolution, by the Refugee Act, of some powers to county governments to work directly with refugees.²⁷ This has made understanding the urban experience of refugees, including security, even more important. Local governments can act more directly and freely on possible assistance – for example, by identifying individuals who require special support.²⁸ In 2025, Nairobi County government launched its Refugee Integration and Community Building Strategy, which acknowledges that ‘challenges persist, including the need for improving housing, infrastructure and services’ for refugees and local populations alike.²⁹

But although the strategy ‘aims to uphold the safety, dignity and self-reliance of refugees and asylum seekers’, it does not contain a single mention of their vulnerability to crime or specific threats such as human trafficking or smuggling, drugs or theft. This is problematic because Somali refugees face a wide range of dangers, some of which are related to their integration into urban society and the job market. This oversight may be linked to a general separation between refugee support work and law enforcement, considered two vastly different policy worlds, which sidelines the intertwined nature of refugee life and urban safety.

Delays or failures in getting formal (state-issued) documents have resulted in refugees being susceptible to corrupt officials who demand bribes for issuing the necessary papers. In turn, this has spawned a document forgery underworld in Eastleigh, which is used by human smuggling and trafficking networks and strengthens Nairobi’s position as a hub for undocumented migrant flows.³⁰ Participants in the Shared Security Dialogues identified this as a major stumbling block, which puts recent migrants at



Attacks by Islamist militants have led to Eastleigh being associated with crime and terrorism, increasing the prejudice faced by residents and heightening tensions between the Somali community and the Kenyan state.

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higher risk of being victimized by corrupt and criminal actors. Several of the recommendations in the accompanying Shared Security Pact aim to address this gap.

Apart from the lack of documentation, refugees and migrants are exposed to a wide range of other safety vulnerabilities tied to urban living. For example, a study on drought-influenced migration from northern Kenya to Nairobi has shown that although rural migrants can find better economic opportunities and access to knowledge and support in the city, they also face new forms of crime.³¹ Migrants in this particular study reported that, whereas ethnic conflicts were more frequent in northern Kenya, in Nairobi, 'crime constitutes an unfamiliar and unexpected threat that follows different rules and rationales that render them defenceless'.³² A 2024 study on refugee children in Nairobi found that 64% of unaccompanied refugee children surveyed reported having experienced violence or abuse, including activities linked to forms of organized crime, such as child labour, extortion, sex work and slavery.³³

Police–community relations

Historically, relations between Nairobi's Somali community and the state, particularly the police, have been contentious. This has been linked to national security responses to the risk of terrorism, including activities related to suspected al-Shabaab members in Eastleigh. Al-Shabaab is a violent extremist group that is fighting against the internationally recognized government in Somalia and has conducted deadly terrorist attacks in Nairobi. The aftermath of the 2013 Westgate Mall attack, which killed more than 60 people,³⁴ led to security operations against an alleged al-Shabaab presence in Eastleigh, with mass arrests and allegations of extortion, beatings and extra-legal detentions.³⁵

State responses to gang activity have also been brutal at times. Although relations have improved in recent years, residents still remember the infamous police officer Ahmed Rashid, who served in a special unit tasked with fighting some of the city's most violent gangs, including the Super Power gang in Eastleigh. He gained a reputation locally³⁶ and in the international media as a 'killer cop',³⁷ and was accused of murdering two unarmed teenagers in Eastleigh in 2017.³⁸ In March 2026, his case was still being tried in the High Court.

Views on the status of police–community relations in Eastleigh varied among participants in the Shared Security Dialogues. Government representatives and law enforcement pointed to an expansion, over recent years, of police presence and resources in Eastleigh, whereas civil society participants emphasized persistent concerns about corruption. The government participants argued that relations have been improved by multisectoral dialogues, peace forums, Nyumba Kumi – a community policing initiative based at the neighbourhood level, established in the late 2010s – and a deliberate effort by law enforcement agencies to switch from crackdowns and police swoops towards forms of dialogue.

Police officials also claimed that the implementation of more police stations inside Eastleigh has helped. Initially, Eastleigh was served only by Pangani Police Station, which is located a few kilometres away. By 2026, it had within its borders several police stations, or posts – for example, California, Pumwani and Moi Air Base. The refurbishment of the California Police Station was funded by local businesspeople, demonstrating the role of local society in developing the area.

However, police and government officials did highlight challenges. For example, the police expressed the hope that improved community relations in future could lead to more proactive intelligence sharing by members of the community. In addition, they identified landlords who house recent migrants or refugees as being particularly reluctant to disclose the identity of their residents to authorities, until

a crime had been committed. This undermines the local intelligence-collection capacity of official and community police actors. Moreover, community-policing initiatives, such as Nyumba Kumi, are premised on volunteerism, and members lack the incentive or motivation to go the extra mile in investigating complex cases or organized criminality.³⁹

However, there is also a clear contrast between the authorities' perception of improved relations and local civil society's sense of vulnerability to police harassment.⁴⁰ Although some civil society and community participants in the dialogues did report that policing initiatives have reduced the extortion and harassment that were common in the past, others spoke of serious challenges.

One of the most significant grievances among the Somali community in Eastleigh is corruption and bribery associated with the police. A common refrain in the Somali community is that police officers treat Somalis as cash machines. For example, participants in the Shared Security Dialogues said that some police officers extort bribes from drivers and recent migrants in exchange for free services, like filing an occurrence book when they report a crime.⁴¹ One member of Eastleigh's Somali community reported that many residents keep cash and jewels at home in the event that they are arbitrarily arrested and need to bribe officers.⁴² But knowledge of this practice encourages burglary.

Somalis and other Horn of Africa migrant groups, such as Oromos and Eritreans, have borne the brunt of police extortion.⁴³ A Somali refugee related that he had been forced to leave Dadaab refugee camp because of the cancellation of aid funds by the US government, and made his way to Eastleigh, staying at a friend's house. Despite having documents issued by the Kenyan government and humanitarian agencies, he has been constantly harassed and arrested by the police. Two weeks before the interview, he had been taken to a nearby police station and forced to pay the officers a bribe of KSh1 000 to be set free.⁴⁴

A symptom of the strained relationship between police and Somali communities in Nairobi is the increasing use in the local Somali community of *maslaha* (also known as *masilaha* or *maslaxa*), a traditional conflict-resolution mechanism anchored in Somali customary law (Xeer). This resort to alternative community-based dispute resolution, rather than the courts and police is driven by rifts with the police as well as by cultural tradition. The Kenyan Constitution does allow for alternative dispute resolution means for out-of-court settlements or as a first instance for hearing complaints, but not for these types of criminal cases.⁴⁵

Shared Security Dialogues participants noted that members of the Somali community often prefer to resolve disputes through *maslaha*, which facilitates mediation and reconciliation in the presence of respected elders. But participants also pointed to significant risks in its use, especially because it largely ignores sanctions under Kenya's legal system for criminal misconduct, and instead imposes alternative sentences.⁴⁶ This system lacks punishment and accountability mechanisms, and recidivism rates are quite high, according to several dialogue participants. A key recommendation from the accompanying Shared Security Pact is that *maslaha* should be used 'only for minor disputes', and that serious crimes (such as physical violence) and organized criminality (such as trafficking) should be referred to the formal justice system.



MONEY LAUNDERING AND THE STIGMA OF CRIME

A long-standing source of the stigmatization of Eastleigh's Somalis, which has recently been reignited, is the area's association with money laundering. This is suspected particularly because Eastleigh has seen a real estate boom, with the construction of several high-rise buildings,⁴⁷ leading to accusations that some members of the Somali community there use construction as a means to launder money.

This reputation goes back at least to the early 2010s, when the media reported that pirates capturing ships off Somalia's coast were laundering money through the traditional *hawala* money transfer system.⁴⁸ This system is based on trust and bypasses the international banking system; many of its operators were based in Eastleigh. Reports alleged that a significant amount of the laundered money was being invested in real estate in Eastleigh.⁴⁹

A more recent scandal has hardened perceptions of money laundering in the Somali community. The scandal involved fraud in a non-profit programme in the US state of Minnesota during the COVID-19 pandemic. It prompted President Donald Trump to proclaim that 'Somali gangs are terrorizing the people of that great state'.⁵⁰ The non-profit programme stated that it was providing meals for school children, but prosecutors claimed that it had inflated the numbers. Many of the defendants in the case are Somalis living in Minnesota.⁵¹ One, a Kenyan national, is accused by US authorities of having used fraudulent proceeds from the non-profit organization to launder money through Kenyan real estate, including by purchasing an apartment building in Nairobi's South C neighbourhood.⁵²

The scandal has reawakened allegations – and resentment – about the high-rise buildings mushrooming on the Eastleigh skyline. For instance, a Kenyan politician from a prominent national party announced that 'there is a mall in Eastleigh that was built using this money' and said the accused person 'is in Eastleigh, we can tell you where he is'.⁵³ In January 2026, the Eastleigh Business Community issued a statement condemning 'an organised campaign aimed at damaging Somali-owned enterprises and undermining the wider business community in the area'.⁵⁴

Despite the public discussion and resentment over the issue, money laundering in Eastleigh remains under-investigated by authorities and the media. This may partly be because of the fear of retaliation, as this form of crime is thought to involve influential people – especially in the highly profitable



Eastleigh's construction boom has made it vulnerable to money laundering through real estate. © Neil Thomas/Corbis via Getty Images

real-estate market. More longitudinal research, including the examination of multiple cases over time in the area, is needed to unveil the intricacies of money laundering in the area.

What is clear is that the Minnesota case has revived not only old suspicions but also old grievances from Eastleigh's Somali community about the way sectors of Kenyan society perceive them. This rift undermines the recent improvements cited above between Eastleigh's Somali community and police, with residents saying officers are still seen as outsiders.



HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING

The combined factors of migrants' hope for economic or educational opportunities, Nairobi's position as a transportation hub in East Africa, and Eastleigh's existing Somali and other Horn of Africa communities, mean that Eastleigh is a major destination for new migrants arriving in the city. It also attracts human smuggling networks, which use Eastleigh as a logistical waypoint for migrants moving towards South Africa along the so-called 'southern route' of migration. Existing research supports this view: the International Organization for Migration, for instance, mentions Eastleigh as a key hub on the migrant route from East African countries (especially Somalia and Ethiopia) to South Africa. The area is said to be used as a place to blend in and hide, and as a gathering point for smugglers to organize the journey south.⁵⁵

The thriving document falsification industry in Nairobi, including in Eastleigh, makes integration easier – further illustrating how different forms of organized crime benefit each other. Eastleigh is a transit point where smuggled migrants acquire identity cards and passports to facilitate their journey to South Africa, Europe and Canada, among other destinations. Upon arrival in Eastleigh, undocumented migrants using the services of smuggling networks are accommodated in congested rental apartments and cheap guest houses, away from the eyes of law enforcement.⁵⁶

A Somali elder in Eastleigh told this study of an Eastleigh-based trader who was believed to be involved in human smuggling. He owned a fleet of minivans which he used to bring Ethiopians and Somalis into Eastleigh. The elder said that this trader had links with businesspeople seeking cheap labour in activities such as street hawking and driving *boda bodas* (motorcycle taxis). Moreover, he said that he had 'a number of police officers and area administrators on monthly retainer' to facilitate the trade. Smugglers like this individual also have ties to recruiters in refugee camps such as Dadaab and Kakuma, who serve as intermediaries.⁵⁷

Extreme weather conditions (drought, in particular) in the Horn of Africa, Somalia and northern Kenya drive migration into Eastleigh.⁵⁸ Many of those pushed out of Somalia by climatic factors find their way to Dadaab refugee camp, where they are recruited by traffickers and smugglers and are then moved to Eastleigh. Some are later smuggled abroad, through South Africa, Uganda or South Sudan. Dadaab refugee camp acts as a transit centre for refugees, where they are kept while syndicates acquire the requisite travel or citizenship documents for onward movement through Kenya. Those who remain in Eastleigh are absorbed into small businesses in the area – including street hawking



In Eastleigh, migrants are at higher risk of being victimized by corrupt and criminal actors. © Siegfried Modola/Reuters

and driving *boda bodas* – or become involved in petty crime (theft, muggings and drug dealing, for example). Several sources reported an increase in Ethiopian and Somali refugees relocating to Eastleigh after the US administration froze funding to aid programmes in refugee camps, exacerbating their dire conditions.⁵⁹

In addition to human smuggling, human trafficking in various forms has been identified in Eastleigh. The neighbourhood is an important transit centre for human trafficking rings that lure workers from other African countries with promises of jobs in the Middle East and Asia. Kenya's National Crime Research Centre named Eastleigh a hotspot for human trafficking in Kenya in 2015.⁶⁰ Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many victims have been rescued in Eastleigh. In June 2021, for example, more than 100 Ugandan women and girls were extricated from labour trafficking situations there.⁶¹ The 2023 US State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report notes that 'Nairobi-based labour recruiters maintain networks in Uganda and Ethiopia that recruit Burundian, Ethiopian, Rwandan, and Ugandan workers through fraudulent offers of employment [in other countries]', and mentions Eastleigh as a particularly popular hub for sex and labour trafficking of Ugandan girls.⁶²

In the Shared Security Dialogues, the main form of human trafficking was identified as trafficking for sexual exploitation, in some instances targeting vulnerable migrant women who arrive in Eastleigh. Some of the sex trafficking into Eastleigh is facilitated by female recruiters, or, as one media report put it, 'well-heeled women traffickers who dupe poverty-stricken girls with promises of life-changing opportunities only to end up in abusive and forced relationships'.⁶³ Some trafficked women report having been lured by guarantees of jobs and education, before being kept in hotel rooms in Eastleigh, guarded by bouncers and sexually abused by wealthy men who sometimes filmed the acts. One civil society group noted that hotel workers collaborate with the traffickers and keep the exploitation hidden from the authorities.⁶⁴

A harrowing account

According to participants in the Shared Security Dialogues, an emerging form of organized crime targeting the Somali community in Eastleigh is the recruitment, by criminal networks, of Somali youth residing in the city, to travel to Libya on the promise of getting into Europe. Once in Libya, these migrants are typically held for ransom.

For example, one Eastleigh resident relayed that one of these networks had lured a younger family member with the offer of a lucrative job in Europe.⁶⁵ The kidnappers pledged to pay for her travel to Europe, accommodation along the way, and even food. Then, a month after her departure, she called from Libya: the criminal network was demanding US\$17 000 for her release. They sent her family video footage of her being tortured and sexually assaulted. The family sold properties in Eastleigh and Garissa to pay the ransom, with the money wired to an account in the United Arab Emirates. The kidnappers promised to set her free once the payment was received, but she had not yet been released at the time of writing.

Other interviewees reported similar cases and suggested that this phenomenon had grown significantly over the previous 18 months. One parent was able to rescue his daughter as she was boarding a flight in Juba, South Sudan, for Libya. She had boarded the plane in Kampala, having travelled all the way from Mandera (in north-eastern Kenya) to Nairobi, making her way to Uganda through the Busia border point.⁶⁶

Criminals have long targeted Somali and other Horn of Africa migrants in Libya for extortion and kidnapping for ransom.⁶⁷ These accounts suggest that criminal networks are now targeting Somali communities in Nairobi with the same tactics.

These harrowing accounts illustrate that the urban neighbourhoods used by traffickers as operational hubs are often the very communities most harmed by organized crime. Yet, despite this, the popular perception remains that it is these communities that are involved in criminal activity, thus unfairly stigmatizing entire neighbourhoods. ■



DOCUMENT FRAUD

The mutually reinforcing nature of different illegal markets in Eastleigh is evident in the practice of document forgery. Although on the surface falsifying documents may seem less harmful than human trafficking, it greatly facilitates trafficking and smuggling, and financially harms local businesses.

Police raids have uncovered several groups working on document falsification in Eastleigh, and there is strong evidence that these groups cooperate with transnational human smuggling networks – though the exact form of this collaboration still is not fully understood. After a 2019 raid on document forgers in an Eastleigh hotel, the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) stated that ‘detectives believe that the two suspects are part of a larger group that smuggles migrants from the region to other countries’.⁶⁸ And in October 2021, they arrested six suspects in Eastleigh who had fake national identification cards, refugee registration documents and academic certificates, among other forged documents.⁶⁹



A Kenyan paramilitary border control vehicle patrols Eastleigh in a crackdown on suspected Islamists. Security risks in Eastleigh are compounded by the prevalence of document forgery. © Brian Inganga/AFP via Getty Images

In another instance, the DCI noted that document forgery ‘severely compromises the integrity of government systems and exposes the country to grave security risks, including the undocumented entry and exit of individuals’.⁷⁰ This comment came after an operation in December 2025 in which local authorities were arrested, suspected of involvement in document forgery. They included two Eastleigh police chiefs, registrars, clerks, technicians and local businesspeople.⁷¹ This example illustrates the challenge of corruption and collusion among some sections of public agencies – a perception shared by several participants in the Shared Security Dialogues.⁷² The participants also confirmed that refugees who can afford to pay bribes use document forgers in Nairobi to obtain fraudulent Kenyan IDs and passports.⁷³

Eastleigh is not an isolated case in Nairobi. The city has long been a hub for human smuggling, a situation made easier by the combination of international transportation links and the availability of document forgery services. Police raids of warehouses that hide undocumented migrants often yield fake travel and identity documents, with other African countries being the most common destination.⁷⁴ In 2018, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) identified Nairobi as a particularly important centre for migrants seeking to travel to Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa.⁷⁵ During the Shared Security Dialogues, participants reported a new trend of human trafficking to northern countries such as South Sudan and Libya (see the box on page 13). This often involves young people lured by promises of jobs in the Middle East or passage into Europe, who pay the traffickers to process documents and are later subjected to torture and ransom demands.⁷⁶

Participants in the Shared Security Dialogues stated that the private sector is affected by document fraud, too, and that fake documents facilitate other crimes like financial fraud, illegal business registration and tax evasion. The Somali business community has complained that some county officials demand bribes to bypass regulations, turning legitimate enterprises into ‘cash cows’ for extortion and opening the door to illegitimate businesses being granted licences.⁷⁷



LAND GRABBING

A not uncommon sight in Eastleigh is graffiti that reads, ‘This plot is not for sale’. In fact, the house in front of the venue for one of the dialogues displayed such graffiti (see image below left). Land grabs and illegal land acquisition are a very real problem, but they are not new. In 2015, pupils of a public primary school in Nairobi were tear-gassed as they protested against their playground being sold off to a hotel.⁷⁸ And in 2018, the media covered blockchain technology as a potential solution to secure title deeds and prevent land grabbing in Kenya.⁷⁹

Land appropriation and illegal construction are linked to corruption and money laundering. A 2022 National Risk Assessment produced for the Business Registration Service reported that although the construction sector made up 20% of all legal entities in Kenya, it was responsible for 57% of money laundering cases – by far the most affected sector, with real estate coming second, at 8% of cases.⁸⁰

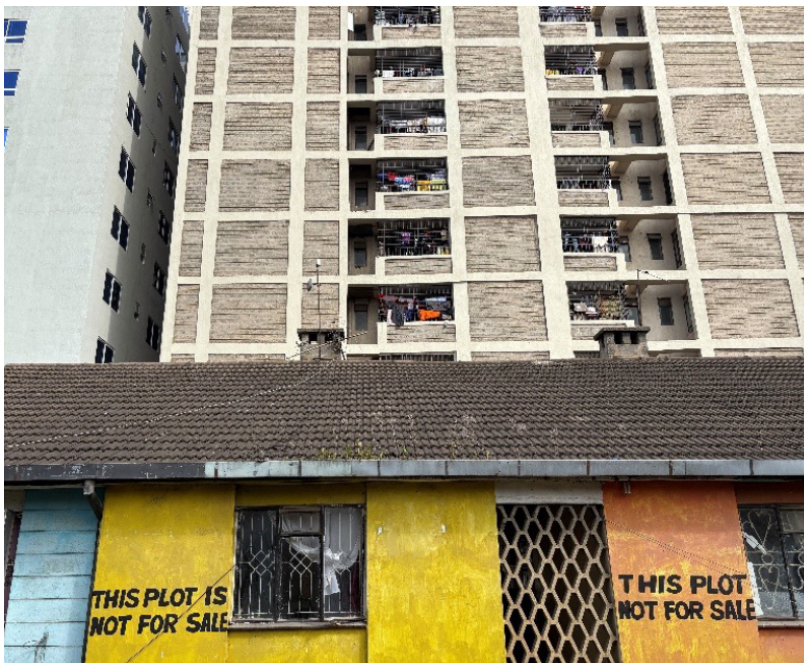
Civil society in Eastleigh has had to organize its own mechanisms to fight land grabbing. Over the years, street protests have saved a number of key public facilities and infrastructure sites from appropriation – including a section of Pumwani Maternity Hospital, Eastleigh Health Centre and Maina Wanjigi Secondary School compound.⁸¹ The Kamukunji Community Peace Network (which was one of the partners in the Shared Security Dialogues project) foiled an attempt by an individual to grab land belonging to Moi Air Base Police Station.⁸² This individual had managed to fraudulently acquire a title deed for the land. The previous year, a local MP thwarted attempts by wealthy individuals to grab part of Maina Wanjigi Secondary School, a government educational institution.⁸³

Some cartels target unoccupied state land, grabbing it through falsified documents and by colluding with government officials and municipal authorities. One common method involves local authorities, including from the local government, approving and facilitating construction for projects despite unresolved objections and court processes around alleged breaches of planning, zoning or building regulations.⁸⁴ A case in February 2026 led to the Commission on Administrative Justice, Kenya’s public ombudsman, recommending ‘prosecution and disciplinary action’ against several local government officials for approving a high-rise building in Eastleigh ‘despite clear regulatory breaches’.⁸⁵

Land appropriation has affected a wide range of social groups – and not all of them marginalized communities (though they are some of the most heavily impacted). On 9 October 2025, a local military commander told members of Kenya’s Parliament that illegal buildings were risking the safety of flights through the Moi Air Base, located in Eastleigh: ‘Structures have been put up, and they are

compromising the security of the base. Efforts to report this to the county government have proved futile since more structures keep coming up.⁸⁶ Even the military, it seems, has been frustrated in its fight against land grabbing.

A Senate Committee on Devolution in March 2022 recommended an investigation into unlawful evictions from Eastleigh housing units for doctors and nurses at a nearby maternity hospital, to make way for private development.⁸⁷ A member of this committee later detailed some of the ways in which land grabbers gave the appearance of legitimacy to the evictions. For instance, people wearing police uniforms would put up a notice on a piece of land indicating that it belonged to the police and that it was up for sale. The land grabbers would then show up at night and ‘kick out everybody’. Another case involved the illegal eviction of staff on land that belonged to the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company, to pave way for construction.⁸⁸



The flow of migrants and refugees into Eastleigh has driven up demand for land and housing, which has led to low-income tenants being forcibly evicted. *Photos: GI-TOC*



GANGS AND ILLEGAL DRUGS

In interviews and community dialogues, Eastleigh community members described gang violence as one dimension of organized criminal activity in the area. The presence of gangs has a double impact on Eastleigh residents – they may become victims of robberies, or be caught up as bystanders in heavy-handed police operations against gangs, as in the earlier case of the alleged ‘killer cop’, Ahmed Rashid.

Nairobi has a long history of gang activity linked to ethnic polarization and political patronage.⁸⁹ Gangs in Kenya have often assumed the role of ‘coercive groups’ in politics, used by politicians as ‘security’ while disrupting opponents’ rallies, restricting movement or even burning homes or businesses belonging to certain groups.⁹⁰ A study of the links between gang activity and politics in Nairobi stated that ‘impunity for criminal enterprises is used as a form of patronage’ by politicians to access areas and gain votes.⁹¹

Eastleigh residents taking part in the Shared Security Dialogues shared similar concerns about gangs employed by landlords and property developers as hired muscle to help enforce illegal evictions of tenants to make way for profitable residential buildings or hotels.⁹² The land-grabbing phenomenon thus intersects with the activities of local gangs.

Local gangs initially dealt in khat (which is legal) but graduated to illegal drugs, including cocaine, heroin, cannabis and methamphetamine, and diverted pharmaceuticals. Nigeria, a semi-informal settlement on the border of Eastleigh and Mathare, is a known hotspot for drug use and peddling, and is frequently the scene of turf wars between local gangs. In addition, Eastleigh residents identified several street corners that are occupied by drug users and sellers and well known to police.⁹³ Diverted pharmaceuticals can be accessed not only from drug peddlers but also over the counter of registered chemists, raising issues of poor oversight and corruption by the Nairobi County government.

Eastleigh has two large criminal gangs – Super Power and the more recently formed Only the Family (OTF). They are often mentioned in the media by name and have a more organized membership structures and hierarchy than the smaller groups that are mainly involved in petty theft. Crucially, large gangs such as Super Power tend to be involved in security rackets and the extortion of businesses, as this requires them to have a more credible capacity to carry out violence in the case of non-payment.

Super Power, the longest-standing gang currently operating in Eastleigh, comprises youths (including Somalis) who have been deported from Western countries that once hosted them as refugees.⁹⁴ They

are thought to engage in crime – such as drug selling, burglaries, violent robberies and extortion – to maintain their Western lifestyles.⁹⁵

Unlike smaller local gangs, members of Super Power sometimes wield firearms, which is relatively rare for Nairobi gangs. Super Power has changed gang dynamics in Eastleigh not just as a result of their firepower but because, before the group emerged, the area's most powerful gang actors tended to be from the nearby neighbourhoods of Mathare and Pangani. The police officer Ahmed Rashid, accused of extrajudicial killings in the name of fighting gangs in Eastleigh, is thought to have weakened Super Power by forcing many of its members to scatter to other areas with Somali populations (such as Komarocks, Kiamaiiko and Mowlem), and to other countries. However, some residents believe that Super Power has become emboldened in recent years.



Eastleigh residents interviewed for this study had witnessed suspected Super Power members extorting businesses on 3rd, 4th and 7th

In Eastleigh, some of the *matatus* and *boda bodas* – essential forms of public transport in Nairobi – are controlled by gangs. Photo: GI-TOC

streets. The gang also controls some of the *boda bodas* and *matatus* on Jam Street in Eastleigh.⁹⁶ One *matatu* operator reported that the group now controls an estimated 25% of the 200 *matatus* that operate on the 10-kilometre Route 18, which serves the Eastleigh and Komarock estates.⁹⁷ Public services such as transportation also tend to be attractive to gangs in Nairobi because their essential nature means that recurring payments can be extorted for 'protection' or continued provision of services.⁹⁸

Another essential service that Super Power has muscled in on is waste collection, attempting to force out private service providers so that the gang can dominate the market. Although Nairobi City County has nominal responsibility for this service, waste management is among the many public state services that are inadequate in low-income areas of Nairobi. Uncollected rubbish has become a serious public nuisance, and creates a service provision gap that attracts criminal groups – known among locals as 'cartels'. They have taken over the function of waste removal and charge residents and business owners for collection. The extent of Super Power's involvement in this business is unknown. The Nairobi County government had to intervene in December 2025 to thwart an attempt by this gang to take over waste collection from existing providers in an area of Eastleigh.⁹⁹

Although residents have recently become aware of the presence of OTF in Eastleigh and neighbouring estates such as Biafra, Mathare and Pangani, little information is currently available regarding their membership and illegal economic activities. The gang seems to have adopted a highly visible approach, with OTF inscriptions now seen on buildings throughout Eastleigh.¹⁰⁰



IDENTIFYING SERVICE PROVISION CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

One cross-cutting finding from the research and the dialogues is that different illegal markets affect the Somali community in Eastleigh, and that they are linked and reinforce each other in a vicious cycle. For instance, several dialogue participants and interviewees reported document forgery as a market that facilitates other types of crime, such as enabling human trafficking and smuggling networks to pay to have foreign nationals pass through Nairobi.

Local human rights organizations have also reported that the area's construction boom (sometimes involving illegal construction on appropriated land) has facilitated the work of human traffickers who lure women into sexual exploitation.¹⁰¹ One civil society group said that the staff of newly constructed hotels and apartments in the area collaborate with the traffickers to keep the exploitation hidden from the authorities.¹⁰²

In addition, the illegal eviction of tenants following some land grabs is made possible by the availability of hired gang members who can enforce the evictions through violence.

The security challenges facing Eastleigh are also linked to climate change, as migrants and refugees fleeing the disruption of agricultural and economic activities in rural Somalia or northern Kenya move into the area. New arrivals, often already in socio-economically marginalized positions, are easily victimized by corrupt or criminal actors.

Underpinning Eastleigh's vulnerability to these different forms of crime are the long-standing gaps in basic service provision and, in the case of policing, mistrust between officers and the Somali community. These gaps pave the way for unregulated and often predatory and violent actors to wrestle into lucrative markets, such as waste collection and 'security' provision. These urban markets



Eastleigh's construction boom has facilitated the work of human traffickers who lure women into sexual exploitation. *Photo: GI-TOC*

become opportunities for mafia-like groups to exploit rents that sustain their territorial presence. Land markets in Nairobi are affected by a more nuanced modality of predatory behaviour, in which land grabbers and sections of the state collaborate through shadowy linkages, and are widely viewed as predatory towards low-income and marginalized tenants that are evicted.¹⁰³ In many Nairobi areas, the terms ‘mafias’ and ‘cartels’ have been used to describe groups of developers, estate agents and local facilitators that act through corrupt linkages to state actors to occupy land and build new developments.¹⁰⁴

Participants in the Shared Security Dialogues outlined a number of barriers to addressing the deficiencies in service provision and suggested ways to devise a more effective response to the forms of organized crime that affect the Somali community in Eastleigh. These can be grouped into five categories, covering the main challenges that face government, policing, community–government relations and civil society initiatives; and a further set of challenges specifically related to climate change. These five thematic areas emerged from the first dialogue and guided the discussion of possible solutions.

The recommendations summarized below – and elaborated on in the Shared Security Pact – aim to address these five key areas. The recommendations draw on the analysis of forms of organized crime that affect the Somali community in Eastleigh, as outlined in this policy brief. Combined, this policy brief and the Shared Security Pact may be useful in devising a comprehensive response to urban security in the area, for policymakers, government officials, civil society organizations and the community.

1. Government initiatives

Participants identified the frequent rotation and transfer of county chiefs and other law enforcement authorities as a critical barrier to trust-building, in that it disrupts established relationships and institutional memory. There is agreement that there is corruption in issuing documents (IDs, passports, business licences), and that traditional dispute resolution (*maslaha*) lacks accountability mechanisms for serious crimes, allowing recidivism. The recommendations included:

- Institutionalizing anchors between the community and government: designate and train two community liaison officers per sub-location within Eastleigh – one from the county government and one from the community – to serve as permanent points of contact, insulated from administrative transfers; establish ward-level joint steering committees comprising chiefs, sub-chiefs, elders and youth, with representation of women, to meet monthly and review security and service delivery issues.
- Using digital systems to promote equity and transparency: there is strong agreement that accelerating the digitization of all county licensing, utility connections (water, electricity), and document issuance would minimize potential cases of corruption (like bribery) and other exploitative behaviour during face-to-face interactions with brokers. Participants emphasized that digital systems must be complemented by robust physical vetting for new registrations to prevent identity fraud.
- Adapting traditional justice mechanisms: while acknowledging the value of *maslaha* (traditional Somali dispute resolution) for social cohesion, participants recommended it be formally recognized only for minor civil and petty crime disputes. For serious crimes (e.g. trafficking, violent crime), mechanisms must be developed to ensure cases are referred to the formal justice system, with safeguards against recidivism.

2. Policing practices and initiatives

Although the community–policing initiative known as Nyumba Kumi has allowed community residents to play a part in safety promotion, it remains reactive and under-resourced. Some police officers persist in profiling and harassing Somalis, and policing resources are misaligned with crime hotspots. Limited investigative capacity hampers cases against organized criminal networks. Suggestions for overcoming these difficulties included:

- Reforming and empowering Nyumba Kumi to become more proactive and efficient: participants strongly agreed that Nyumba Kumi is a good idea, but added that it needs better equipment, more vetting and training for members, more incentives for members to be proactive in investigating crime and mechanisms for accountability in relation to communities.
- Eliminating discrimination and enhancing accountability among law enforcement: there was also agreement that more specific training and preparation would help police to better understand the needs and vulnerabilities of Somali communities. This would include mandatory cultural competency training for police officers serving in Eastleigh and surrounding divisions on Somali culture, refugee rights and trauma-informed policing.
- Concentrating policing resources more on increasing crime prevention and investigative capacities: this would include more patrol vehicles and investigative resources for the authorities to tackle cross-jurisdictional networks and enhanced CCTV networks in public spaces with a centralized monitoring unit.

3. Community relations with police and government

Corruption is a critical enabler of trafficking, document fraud and protection rackets, destroying public trust in state institutions and affecting public security. The participants recommended:

- Digitization of document verification: in line with the suggested digitization of public services and documentation (in theme 1), participants suggested police help in implementing digitization initiatives. For example, police should integrate their document verification tools to the Department of Immigration's database and INTERPOL's Stolen and Lost Travel Documents database. Alongside digitization, the government should invest in biometric systems (which are less vulnerable to fraud) and conduct periodic audits of document issuance points.
- Digital watermarking: all county-issued permits and land documents should include QR codes with encrypted data verifiable via a public county app, in order to reduce forgery.
- Enhancing protection of victims and whistleblowers: this would include anonymity guarantees such as relocation and identity change provisions for high-risk informants, and free legal representation for whistleblowers. Participants also suggested a confidential crime reporting hotline with language support in Somali and Swahili, managed by an independent civil society group.

4. Civil society initiatives

Civil society organizations and local committees for peacebuilding are dependent on ad hoc, project-based external funding, which limits sustainability. Activists face harassment, intimidation and bureaucratic interference. Improvements to this situation could involve:

- Institutionalizing stakeholder forums: the groups agree on the need to establish quarterly, high-level security forum(s) with national government representatives, business leaders, Nyumba Kumi,

and civil society organizations to share intelligence and coordinate responses. These forums must have clear agendas, neutral facilitation, and include women and youth representatives.

- Strengthen financial sustainability for civil society organizations: participants strongly emphasized the importance of building more financial sustainability for peacebuilding NGOs in Eastleigh and other settings affected by crime. This includes reducing their dependency on short-term funding from external donors and developing internal (Kenyan) tools to sustain initiatives. Civil society organizations should diversify funding by developing income-generating projects, applying for government affirmative action funds and enhancing volunteer networks. International partners should provide longer-term, flexible core funding.
- Furnishing civil society organizations with more robust protection mechanisms: this would include a protection protocol, consisting of an agreement between the Nairobi Regional Police Command, the NGOs Coordination Board, and a civil society organization coalition guaranteeing freedom of movement and assembly, 48-hour notification for any official inquiries, and a joint rapid response team (by police) to address threats. Additionally, digital security training should be provided for activists, covering encrypted communication, secure data storage and anti-surveillance tactics.

5. Climate change and related insecurity

Climate-driven displacement from Somalia and northern Kenya increases the flow of highly vulnerable migrants who face exploitation by smuggling networks, forced labour and sexual abuse upon arrival in Eastleigh. Recent migrants lack pathways for robust safety or integration mechanisms, such as safe housing, documentation and social support systems (including mental health). Participants often mentioned that victims of climate-related displacement are 'invisible', in that it is difficult to differentiate them from other migrants facing other types of push factors from Somalia and northern Kenya. Their advice was to:

- Implement measures for identification and immediate support to newly arrived migrants: participants suggested the government should support community-led awareness campaigns to help identify new arrivals. Create safe referral pathways to existing services and establish safe houses for vulnerable groups, particularly girls fleeing forced marriages.
- Create integrated protection and livelihood support for migrant communities: in the long term, the government and civil society should jointly develop more comprehensive social support structures to help migrants arriving in Eastleigh to find and keep safe housing, documentation, legal support, mental health support, childcare services and skills (especially language and digital ones). This would include a housing programme and social resilience hubs offering training on languages and professional skills.



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