

# CONTESTATIONS OVER SPACE: URBAN GREENING AND DISPLACEMENT IN PUMWANI-MAJENGO, NAIROBI

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With 2 figures and 1 tables

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**Summary:** This paper examines the intersection of urban land appropriation with greening and ungreening in informal settlements, focusing on how internal power struggles drive displacement and exacerbate inequality. Using Nairobi's Pumwani–Majengo as a case study, the research applies the Situated Urban Political Ecology (SUPE) framework, grounded in environmental justice, to analyse disputes over green spaces. Fieldwork combined semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, life histories, field observations, and archival review with GIS and Landsat-based spatial analysis. Adaptive sampling, reflexivity, and methodological triangulation were used to navigate sensitive contexts and ensure data robustness. Displacement extends beyond physical relocation, severing social, cultural, and economic ties that are vital to resilience. Residents respond through resignation, negotiation, or active resistance. 'Greening' and 'ungreening' occur simultaneously, politicised and tied to dispossession, enclosure, and green 'evictions' that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, particularly in riparian areas. Land changes create socioeconomic enclaves, privileging wealthier newcomers and marginalising low-income residents. The study challenges the notion of urban green spaces as neutral public goods, showing their appropriation for elite interests, and contributes to debates on environmental governance and land commodification in informal contexts by illustrating how green space disputes reproduce socio-spatial inequalities in rapidly growing cities.

**Keywords:** Urban appropriation, greening and ungreening, displacement, enclaves, power dynamics, informal settlements, environmental justice

## 1 Introduction

Informal settlements in many African cities underscore the challenges of green space development, where community resilience often clashes with land commodification and urban sustainability. In many cities, encroachment on road reserves and riparian lands, combined with the unchecked appropriation of green spaces, has led to environmental degradation in many areas (NJORGE et al. 2020). Competing interests from businesspeople, politicians, and other actors further lead to the fragmentation of communities and the exacerbation of socioeconomic inequalities (LINDELL & AMPAIRE 2016, COBBINAH & FINN 2023, TITZ & CHIOHA 2019). While community organizations foster hope through initiatives such as river clean-ups and tree planting, selective policy implementation and the commodification of communal open spaces continue to lead to the displacement and marginalisation of long-term residents in many settlements (BLOCH & MEYER 2023, SIMONE 2010). This phenomenon unfolds amidst global calls for greener urban areas as pathways to sustainable development and the realisation of resilient, sustainable, and inclusive cities, as outlined in key global frameworks

such as the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 on cities and human settlements (AKANBANG et al. 2024). At the regional level, the African Urban Agenda encourages countries to prioritise environmental sustainability, resilience, and risk reduction in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda across Africa (AFRICAN UNION 2020). To this effect, governments are rolling out national greening initiatives, such as Kenya's Jaza Miti campaign, which aims to increase tree cover to 30 percent by 2032 (THE NATION 2022). However, implementation can disproportionately affect informal settlements, cause displacement, and leave powerful actors unaffected.

Against this backdrop, governments across Africa are striving to meet set targets through frameworks such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). The Kenyan government, for instance, is advancing its green agenda through initiatives such as the *Jaza Miti program*, a presidential directive that aims to increase Kenya's tree cover to 30 percent by 2032 (THE NATION 2022), in line with global sustainability goals. On paper, this represents a bold vision for combating climate change and positioning Kenya as a leader in environmental sustainability. However, this vision often unfolds at the expense of



the city's poorest residents, leaving powerful land-owners untouched. As Nairobi, Kenya's Capital and commercial nerve centre, continues to grow and urbanisation accelerates, land-related conflicts have become increasingly violent, often camouflaging under the guise of environmental restoration. Following the May 2024 floods, mass evictions displaced approximately 42,000 households (WAKHUNGU et al. 2024), supposedly for disaster prevention (OPANGA 2025). Across many contexts, eviction campaigns appear to disproportionately affect informal settlements, while better-off and politically connected residents experience far less disruption (ibid.). Much of the land cleared is later repurposed for commercial development, often justified as an enhancement of infrastructure. Meanwhile, urbanisation increases demand for housing, hospitals, and schools, elevating the threat to green spaces as priorities shift towards development.

This study, therefore, explores the dynamics shaping the appropriation of green spaces amidst competing interests within Nairobi's informal settlements by focusing on the informal settlement of Pumwani-Majengo. We examine how green spaces in informal settlements are shaped by fluidity and contestation, where economic, political, and environmental forces, as well as local needs, influence their appropriation. Additionally, we examine how non-state actors influence land dynamics and community responses, recognizing that urban greening initiatives disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, leading to manifestations of neighbourhood fragmentation, marginalization, and displacement of low-income residents, as well as socioeconomic inequalities and conflicts (LOMBARD & RAKODI 2016). We argue that changes in both ownership and use of communal and public green/open spaces are central drivers of Nairobi's uneven 'greening' and 'ungreening' processes, producing new forms of dispossession and displacement in Pumwani-Majengo. This study addresses three questions: (1) How have green and open spaces changed since the 1980s? (2) What mechanisms and actors drive ownership vs. use change? (3) What socio-ecological impacts and community responses follow?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section Two provides a comprehensive review of the literature, examining the contestations associated with green space development. Section Three presents the conceptual framework, highlighting Urban Political Ecology (UPE) as an analytical lens. Section Four provides the background and the materials and methods used to examine green space

dynamics in Nairobi's Pumwani-Majengo. Section Five explores the empirical data, examining land commodification and the power dynamics of urban greening initiatives, displacement processes and mechanisms shaping Somali enclaves, the socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural impacts, as well as parallel but conflicting processes of 'greening and ungreening,' and community responses. This study, we argue, challenges the conventional view of urban green spaces as public goods, exposing their co-option for elite-driven aesthetic and commercial purposes. In summation, we offer insights for future urban sustainability initiatives and environmental agendas in African cities, contributing to broader debates on urban greening, politics, and contestation.

## 2 Researching contestations over green space development

Urban greening, while often promoted as a technical policy and cornerstone of sustainable development, often heightens inequalities rather than mitigating them. Critical scholars have shown how greening initiatives benefit wealthier populations while displacing marginalised communities through gentrification and commodification (DAVIES 2021, LANCIONE 2019). O'LOUGHLIN (2021) attributes these disparities to inherent flaws in urban planning, while GYAWALI et al. (2016) highlight how, amidst climate change pressures, such processes showing urban expansion perpetuate inequity and inequality. ANGUELOVSKI et al. (2020) note that greening initiatives often drive up property values, displacing lower-income residents. WACHSMUTH & ANGELO (2018: 452-455) critique these initiatives for being marketed as public goods while primarily serving to enhance urban competitiveness, often at the expense of inclusive public access.

Urban appropriation, or the contested claiming, control, and transformation of land, has often been examined in terms of 'appropriation to green,' where land is repurposed for environmental restoration. However, this paper considers 'appropriation involving both greening and ungreening,' in which ownership and use change simultaneously, resulting in both restoration and loss. These processes are particularly evident in cities of the Global South, where informal tenure systems, fragmented governance, and entrenched power asymmetries influence access to and control over land. Focusing on the local urban scale enables a more detailed tracing of these mechanisms than broad, continent-wide accounts of 'African greening.'

In the global North, debates about green spaces often focus on planning, governance, and ecological sustainability, highlighting issues such as rapid urbanisation, socio-economic inequalities, and the political motives behind greening initiatives (RIZZO 2020, GHERTNER 2014, LEITNER et al. 2008, KARIC & DILLER 2023). In contrast, research on African cities emphasizes the politicisation of greening, where projects are often utilized as tools of state power, urban branding, and capital accumulation (NDEBELE-MURISA et al. 2020, MWAURA & LAWHON 2024). Green space policies often favour wealthier neighbourhoods, neglecting marginalised communities and reflecting broader patterns of enclosure and urban growth. Studies from South Africa, Kenya, and elsewhere demonstrate that weak tenure security and enforcement enable powerful actors to privatise communal land, resulting in the loss of green infrastructure and increased inequalities (LOMBARD & RAKODI 2016, HUCHZERMAYER 2011, MYERS 2011). In African cities, green spaces are highly adaptable, often changed through contested governance, commodification, and shifting ownership. This is evident in Nairobi, where enclosure, reclassification, and speculative development have transformed communal green spaces into private areas.

Previous studies highlight contestations over Nairobi's urban green spaces, rooted in socio-political struggles and uneven governance (MBATIA 2016, ANGUELOVSKI et al. 2020). Research emphasises the role of diverse actors, migrant networks, local elites, officials, and investors, in shaping land markets and the Somali business community. Eastleigh is a significant contributor to growth, but its activities relate to speculative urbanism, informal economies, and governance gaps (CARRIER 2017, SCHARRER 2018, GOODFELLOW 2022). Studies reveal how overlapping interests among state and non-state actors co-construct uneven development and contested land use, positioning Somali investments within broader processes of accumulation and exclusion shaping Nairobi's green spaces.

In Kenya, ambition to position Nairobi as the *green city in the sun* has led to high-profile greening projects aligned with the country's constitutional commitment to environmental sustainability, yet these efforts often prioritise political visibility and economic gains over inclusivity (GOODFELLOW 2022: 100). In practice, urban greening initiatives are contested processes, shaped by challenges rooted in urban poverty, governance, and contested land tenure. KARIUKI (2023) identifies land grabbing and weak policy enforcement as critical obstacles to equitable

access to green spaces in Nairobi, where urbanisation pressures further complicate efforts to protect these areas. NJOROGE et al. (2020) highlight the essential role that green spaces play in urban livelihoods. Yet, their utility is frequently contested as public lands are increasingly repurposed for commercial developments, such as malls and high-rise buildings (MARX 2016). These dynamics illustrate how socioeconomic disparities and political power intersect to marginalise vulnerable populations in green space planning.

These patterns correspond with broader debates on accumulation by dispossession and green grabbing, where privatisation, selective investment, and strategic neglect transform communal lands into exclusionary assets (HARVEY 2003, ELLIOTT-COOPER et al. 2020). In Nairobi, such processes are evident in the targeted upgrading, neglect, or removal of green amenities that fragment neighbourhoods and open spaces, fostering speculative redevelopment (WACHSMUTH & ANGELO 2018). TITZ & CHIOTHA (2019) demonstrate how elite-driven greening projects can coexist with enclosure and loss of commons, a dynamic reflected in Nairobi's city-wide initiatives such as the Nairobi Integrated Urban Development Master Plan (NIUPLAN 2014-2030, NCC 2014), which encourages urban greening through park rehabilitation and wetland conservation, and the Breathe Cities Initiative launched in 2024, designed to reduce emissions by promoting urban forestry and green infrastructure in high-pollution areas, including informal settlements (NCC 2024). These programmes risk reinforcing historic exclusions by prioritising planned neighbourhoods (NJOROGE et al. 2020, KARIUKI 2023, NCC 2024). In this context, appropriation refers to power-laden processes in which state and non-state actors exert control over land, often displacing lower-income groups under the guise of sustainability or development (ANGUELOVSKI et al. 2020, WACHSMUTH & ANGELO 2018). These city-level dynamics set the stage for understanding how contestation over green and open spaces occurs most sharply within informal settlements.

Within informal settlements, urban greening initiatives are deeply contested due to the intersection of poverty, displacement, and environmental justice; yet, they play a crucial role as sources of livelihood and climate resilience for people living in informal settlements (PARKER 2020). In Nairobi's informal settlements, green space governance efforts are further complicated by inconsistent policies and regulatory gaps, leaving these spaces vulnerable to appropriation by powerful actors (NJOROGE et al. 2020). Although Kenya's Constitution guarantees

the right to a clean environment and access to public land, business interests and political elites often undermine these rights. Ongoing Nairobi River rehabilitation involves removing encroachments and vegetation, altering riparian and open space use and visibility in neighbourhoods, exemplifying the socio-political dynamics at play (OPANGA 2025). MESO (2013: 22-28) explains that green spaces in informal settlements in Kenya often function as 'transitional zones' where control shifts based on power dynamics, encapsulating the broader socio-political struggles. Additionally, GOODFELLOW (2022: 100-105) highlights how informal governance networks deepen urban inequality, with politically connected individuals securing exclusive access to green spaces at the expense of the marginalised.

This literature, while extensively examining urban greening as a contested space shaped by socioeconomic inequities and governance dynamics, highlights a critical gap: the need for a more nuanced understanding of internal power dynamics in the appropriation and use of green spaces within contested areas. As much of the existing research focuses on issues such as gentrification, commodification, and the marginalisation of vulnerable populations through urban greening projects, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how power dynamics within informal settlements influence the appropriation and use of green spaces. Accordingly, this paper challenges the conventional view of urban green spaces as universally accessible public goods by examining how competing interests disrupt social equity and foster elite-driven environmental agendas. In so doing, we respond to scholars such as DIKO & HOLLSTEIN (2021), who, in their critique of one-size-fits-all approaches to urban greening, have noted that theories originating in the Global North often fail to address the socioeconomic realities of the Global South. We highlight the commodification of land and the power dynamics underlying urban greening initiatives, as well as the resulting displacement, which has diverse socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural implications.

### 3 Toward a conceptual framework

This paper employs the Urban Political Ecology (UPE) framework to examine the intricate relationships among political, social, ecological, and economic processes shaping urban environments and their inhabitants (HEYNEN et al. 2006). Using UPE, the study analyses the dynamic and context-specific realities of green space appropriation in informal

urban settlements, with a particular focus on the intersection of power, governance, and socioeconomic inequalities. This framework moves beyond merely exploring how capitalism, modernity, and historical factors shape urban spaces, delving into how various forms of social power are created and sustained through the production of 'social natures' (SWYNGEDOUW 1996).

Situated Urban Political Ecology (SUPE) expands and redefines UPE by focusing on urban experiences in the Global South. SUPE emphasises layered informality, negotiated property regimes, flexible land claims, non-state authority, and everyday practices that shape access to urban nature (LAWHON et al. 2018, LAWHON et al. 2020). It shifts focus to the institutional logics and normative frameworks of Southern cities, which conventional UPE often under-theorises. This study's contribution is threefold: (1) applying UPE concepts within a SUPE-informed empirical framework; (2) introducing and refining the idea of ungreening, which describes simultaneous processes of commodification/privatisation and selective removal/neglect that occur alongside elite-led greening; and (3) empirically demonstrating how these processes unfold in Pumwani–Majengo, revealing ethnic–economic intersections and micro-level appropriation mechanisms that SUPE highlights but broader UPE texts seldom explore in Southern informal contexts. This includes the influence of powerful non-state actors, such as the Somali business community (CARRIER 2017), and the vulnerability of communal green spaces to speculative encroachment (LOMBARD & RAKODI 2016, KARIUKI 2023). SUPE therefore supports a contextually grounded analysis of how power operates through state control, capital flows, informal claims, customary practices, and localised resistance.

Our approach builds on earlier work that analysed the socio-political dimensions of green space contestation in Nairobi (MBATIA 2016) but extends this by operationalising Situated Urban Political Ecology (SUPE) to examine both greening and ungreening, and empirically tracing displacement dynamics in Pumwani–Majengo. We draw explicitly from principles of environmental justice and equity, informed by intersectional approaches that emphasise antisubordination and relational dynamics (ANGUELOVSKI et al. 2020). To evaluate competing claims in Pumwani–Majengo, this study integrates legal benchmarks from the Kenyan Constitution (2010) with UPE analysis: Article 40 (property rights), Article 42 (environmental access), Article 43 (housing and economic rights), and Article 67(2)(e)



(redress for land injustices) provide normative tests. Claims are legitimate where they respect these provisions, promote inclusive greening and due process, and are illegitimate where they enable elite commodification and exacerbate inequality (GoK 2010).

Central to this analysis is the concept of 'ungreening,' which refers to the deliberate or indirect removal of green spaces through commodification, privatisation, and displacement, often disguised as urban development or environmental restoration. Ungreening extends 'green grabbing' (RIZZO 2020) by linking it to processes of dispossession, where communal lands are appropriated for elite interests, leading to the fragmentation of neighbourhoods (COBBINAH & FINN 2023). Drawing from the enclosure concept, ungreening encloses urban commons, historically open spaces for recreation and livelihoods, transforming them into exclusive enclaves that exclude low-income residents (FERNÁNDEZ 2012). This aligns with 'green evictions,' where environmental initiatives, such as riparian clearances, justify forced removals under the guise of sustainability, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups (ASANTE & HELBRECHT 2020, OUMA 2024). In Pumwani-Majengo, ungreening manifests in parallel with greening, politicised through selective implementation that reinforces socioeconomic inequalities and echoes colonial land enclosures (WHITTAKER 2012).

Mainstream UPE's Northern bias can obscure the historical and informal logics that shape Southern cities, which are often marked by flexible land regimes, informal governance, and non-state actors. Therefore, we adopt a SUPE approach (LAWHON et al. 2020, LAWHON et al. 2018), focusing on Southern urban settings and the layered informality, flexible land rights, and non-state power structures typical of cities like Nairobi. SUPE emphasises embedded, relational, and everyday practices that influence urban environments, providing a more grounded understanding of how appropriation occurs in places like Pumwani-Majengo. Our contribution to Situated UPE lies in demonstrating how ownership or use changes the structure of urban greening-ungreening cycles under weak governance. We demonstrate that in informal and low-income settings, changes in ownership of communal and public green spaces, often through enclosure or reclassification, serve as a key pathway to 'ungreening.' We also highlight how cycles of greening and ungreening are co-produced by selective enforcement and speculative development, involving both state and non-state actors.

## **4 The contested greening of space in Pumwani-Majengo, Nairobi**

### **4.1 Background**

Urban green spaces play a crucial role in making cities liveable by offering a wide range of ecosystem services. For example, they provide food and raw materials, regulate water and air purification, carbon sequestration, and temperature control, support soil formation, and offer spiritual and recreational value (MULWA 2019). Despite these benefits, green spaces in urban centres are sometimes perceived as vacant, awaiting repurposing for infrastructure projects or other development goals with quantifiable economic returns (MULWA 2019). This perception has been true for informal settlements such as Pumwani-Majengo, where central and municipal governments have continuously prioritised development projects over preserving green spaces, thereby leading to their framing as underutilised resources rather than essential components of sustainable urban environments (OWEN 2016).

Pumwani-Majengo (see Fig. 1) historically emerged from a settlement scheme established by the colonial British government in 1924 for migrants from various parts of Kenya and other groups, including those from Somalia (see Tab. 1). Over time, it has lost significant portions of its green spaces (cf. Section 5). These green spaces, once essential to community life for recreation, livelihood, and social cohesion, are now being commodified and privatised, fuelling displacement pressures and exacerbating inequalities (WHITTAKER 2012). Yet, Pumwani-Majengo houses approximately 43,000 residents (KNBS 2019) and serves as affordable housing for Nairobi's low-income residents. However, the settlement's proximity to the Central Business District (CBD) has made it a target for commercial interests, with rising land values and ongoing development projects creating persistent displacement pressures (OCHIENG 2007). Land commodification, driven by powerful business interests, has transformed green and open spaces into commercial properties, intensifying pressures on green spaces and displacing vulnerable communities who rely on them for survival and climate resilience (SCHARRER 2018, MARX 2016).

The Somali community has shaped Pumwani-Majengo's socioeconomic landscape through investments in land, businesses, and real estate, forming enclaves like Eastleigh that both resist

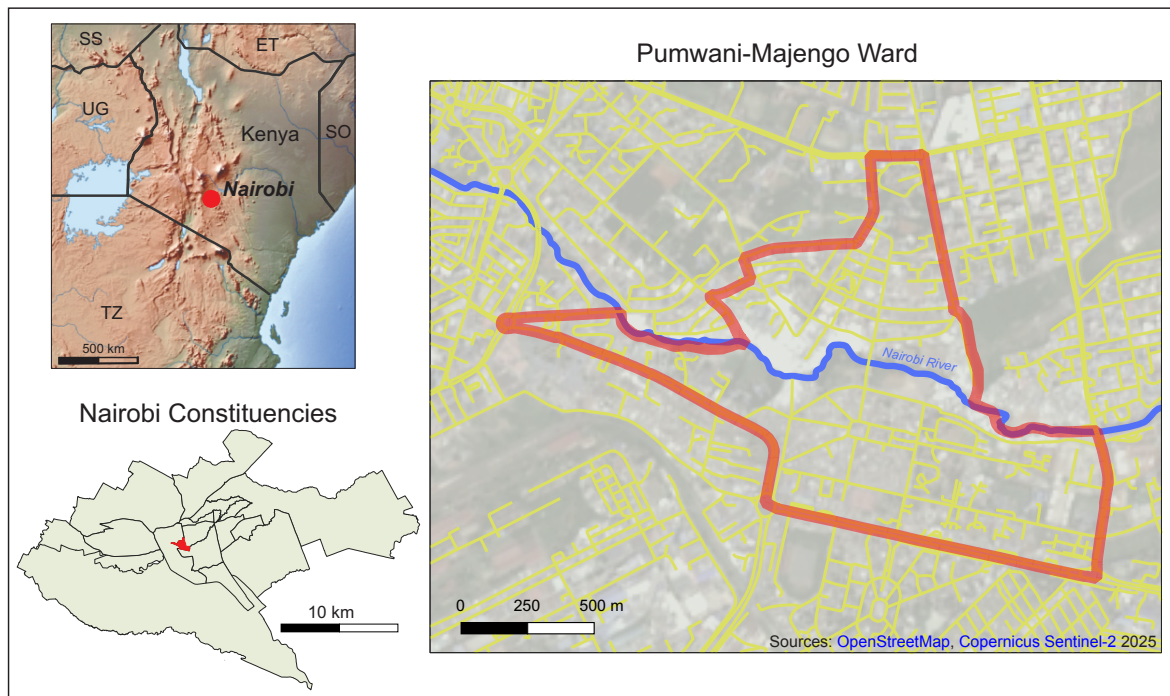


Fig. 1: Location of Pumwani in central Nairobi

cultural assimilation and contribute to urban fragmentation (WHITTAKER 2012, CARRIER 2017, SHIZA 2019). The ongoing struggle of the community to assert its rights over land resources in Pumwani-Majengo reflects the deeper historical, cultural, and political forces shaping urban development in Nairobi. From precolonial trade to colonial-era displacement, post-independence marginalisation, refugee influxes, and ongoing socio-political tensions (Tab. 1), the Somali community's history underscores the complexities of land access and urban exclusion (BODOMO 2020, WHITTAKER 2012). It highlights the deeply politicised nature of urban space, land, and environmental resources, where powerful actors influence both the physical and social landscapes of marginalised communities (BODOMO 2020, WHITTAKER 2012). Such political dynamics surrounding green spaces in cities like Nairobi compel marginalised communities to navigate exclusionary policies, commodification, and displacement, while also asserting their identities and protecting their livelihoods (LANDAU 2006, OWEN 2016). This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the competing dynamics surrounding the use and appropriation of green spaces, highlighting the displacement and contestation that arise amidst rapid urban greening and ungreening initiatives.

## 4.2 Materials and methods

This study employs a case study design and qualitative methods to examine socio-political dynamics, environmental justice, and the appropriation of green spaces. Data was gathered over two extended field visits: (Aug 2023–Jan 2024; June–Aug 2024) using adaptive sampling. Semi-structured interviews ( $n=45$ ) were conducted with residents, displaced individuals, community leaders, officials, land experts, and private sector representatives, selected through purposive and snowball sampling, to capture diverse perspectives on land tenure and eviction. Focus Group Discussions ( $n=6$ ) with youth, women, elders, and displaced families provided collective insights into land commodification, while Life Histories ( $n=6$ ) documented displacement experiences.

Green space was defined to include street verges, vacant lots, vegetation along railway tracks, brownfields, riparian strips, and corridors beneath power lines (RUPPRECHT & BYRNE 2014). For analytical purposes, we distinguish five green space typologies: (1) riparian zones, (2) playgrounds and school grounds, (3) small open lots and verges, (4) markets and informal parks, and (5) brownfields or underutilised land. This typology was created based on land-use classification and field observations to

Tab. 1: Timeline of the Somali population presence and urban contestations in Nairobi

Period	Key Developments	Implications for the Somali Community
<b>Pre-colonial to Colonial (pre–1963)</b>	Somali traders and pastoralists migrated into Nairobi; land acquisitions in East Township (1917) were followed by forced relocation to Pumwani-Majengo (1921) (CARRIER 2017).	Early integration limited by colonial policies; established Somali presence in Pumwani-Majengo and spatial marginalisation (CARRIER 2017).
<b>Post-independence to Early 2000s (1963–2010)</b>	Regional instability (Shifty War, Somali conflict) and migration reinforced Pumwani-Majengo as a refuge and trading hub; Somalis expanded commerce in Eastleigh amid growing securitisation (SCHARRER 2018, CARRIER 2017).	Expanded economic networks but persistent social and political exclusion; settlement became more diverse and commercially focused active. (SCHARRER 2018, CARRIER 2017).
<b>Urban Planning, Governance, and Present (2010–present)</b>	County reforms and urban renewal accelerated redevelopment and densification in Pumwani-Majengo, attracting diverse residents while raising eviction risks (CARRIER 2017, DE VERGÈS 2022, SHIZA 2019)	Somalis remain central to local economy and culture but face eviction risks, land loss, and ongoing spatial contestation (CARRIER 2017, DE VERGÈS 2022, SHIZA 2019).

represent categories visible in satellite images and on-site. Institutional grounds, such as school playgrounds, were incorporated because they appear as distinct land-use zones, even when access is restricted. It enables us to examine how various mechanisms of appropriation influence distinct forms of greening and ungreening. Model outputs were validated through ground truthing and historical maps. Data was transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed using ATLAS.ti. The study was approved by the University of Bonn ethics review committee; anonymisation and trauma-informed practice were followed. The lead author engaged with residents in Swahili and local slang. As a Kenyan researcher at the University of Bonn, with access facilitated by local gatekeepers, the author's positionality may have influenced participation. To mitigate bias, we implemented reflexive measures, including triangulation, anonymisation, and trauma-informed interviewing.

## 5 Results and discussion

### 5.1. Changes in land use in Pumwani Majengo

A spatial analysis conducted from 1984 to 2023 indicates a notable reduction in green space, declining from 94.8% to 58.8%. Concurrently, built-up areas have experienced a substantial increase, rising from 5.2% to 41.4%. Overall, there has been a decrease of 36 percentage points, corresponding to a 38% relative reduction in green and open spaces. This trend underscores the rapid pace of

urban expansion and the consequent intensification of pressure on natural land cover. (GIS Analysis, Fig. 2). This loss of open and green spaces was corroborated by field observations and community accounts, which consistently described the conversion of communal spaces into commercial or residential developments. Residents explained that rising costs and the disappearance of affordable housing pushed many to peri-urban areas such as Kamulu and Joska, where land remained more accessible (Interview, resident, July 2024). These outward movements, combined with inward investment by wealthier developers, have altered both the physical environment and the social fabric of Pumwani-Majengo.

Community testimonies emphasised the cumulative effect of these changes: as new high-rise developments replaced playgrounds, riparian zones, and market spaces, long-term residents found it increasingly difficult to maintain a meaningful stake in the neighbourhood. One resident reflected that relocation was “*the only option once land became too expensive*” (Interview, Resident, July 2024), while others noted that even those who stayed faced exclusion from decision-making as wealthier settlers consolidated influence over local planning. The GIS analysis and qualitative evidence highlight the profound connection between land commodification, displacement, and environmental loss. The transformation of green and open spaces into built-up areas not only reshaped the settlement's physical landscape but also widened socioeconomic inequalities, setting the stage for the dynamics explored in later sections.

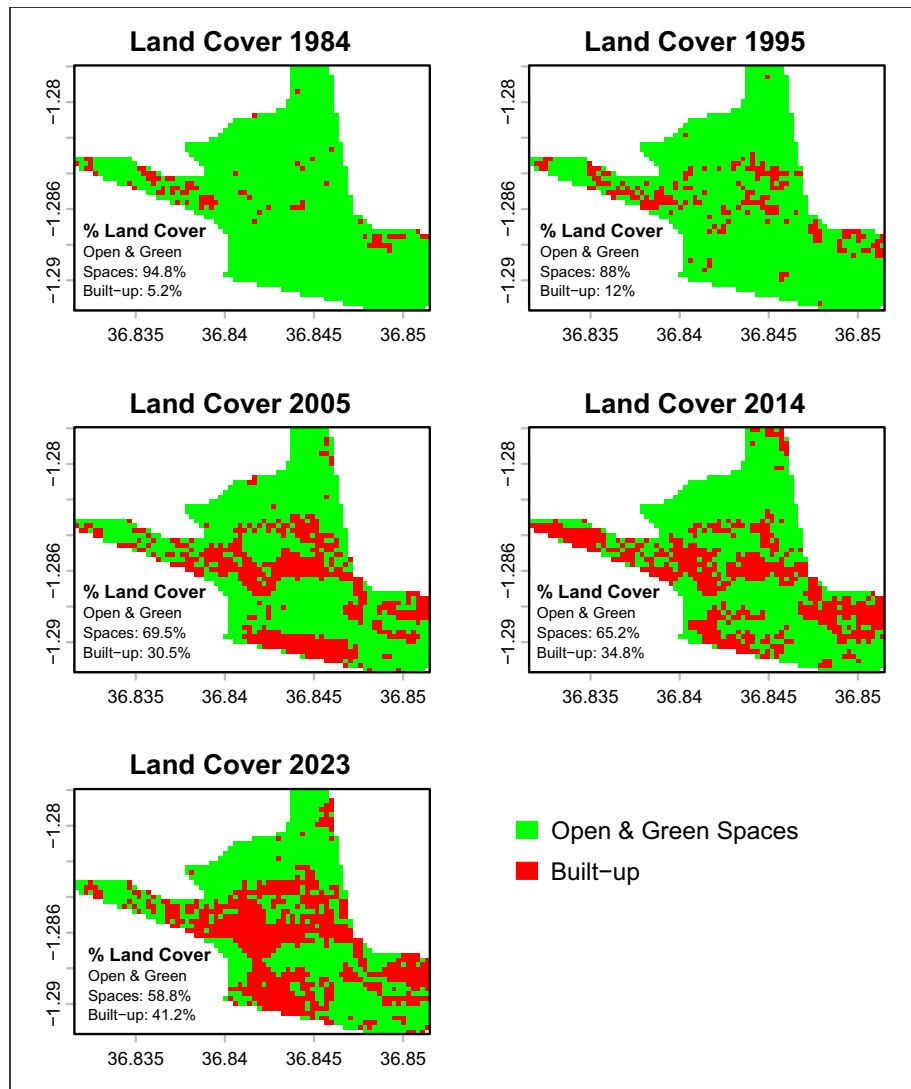


Fig 2: Land cover change in Pumwani-Majengo

Private investment, especially speculative capital from diaspora networks<sup>1)</sup>, has played a vital yet unevenly documented role in Nairobi's urban transformation. While Somali business networks are often highlighted as influential in Eastleigh and surrounding areas, their exact scale remains debated, and caution is necessary to prevent overstatement (CARRIER 2017, SCHARRE 2018, GOODFELLOW 2022). What is clear, however, is that remittance-driven investment interacts with weak governance and selective enforcement, raising displacement pressures in nearby settlements such

<sup>1)</sup> These estimates imply investments on the order of billions of dollars (DE VERGÈS 2022), but they are not drawn from audited accounts and should therefore be treated as indicative rather than definitive.

as Majengo (OUMA 2024). Our analysis contributes to this body of work by demonstrating how speculative investment not only accelerates land commodification but also interacts with localised practices of greening and ungreening.

For example, while Landsat imagery captured the broad reduction of green space, higher-resolution imagery and community accounts revealed socially significant but easily overlooked forms of greenery, gardens, courtyards, and market-edge vegetation, pointing to the need for situated, mixed-methods approaches that can trace both macro-level patterns and everyday practices (LOMBARD & RAKODI 2016, BOERI et al. 2022). This situates these findings within the broader debates on accumulation by dispossession and green grabbing (HARVEY 2003, ANGUELOVSKI et al. 2020).



## 5.2 Land commodification and power dynamics of greening initiatives in Pumwani-Majengo

Pumwani-Majengo's urban greening initiatives are deeply shaped by land commodification and prevailing power dynamics. Our interviews and field observations reveal that these processes, along with patterns of displacement, were profoundly shaped by the interplay between formal and informal actors through three mechanisms of ownership and use change. Firstly, politicians and cartels<sup>2)</sup> exploit unclear land tenure to privatise green spaces. In the settlement, we observed that green spaces previously used for community activities, such as school playgrounds, were fenced, reclassified, and converted to commercial plots. This exploitation has created significant barriers for vulnerable individuals, forcing them to navigate corrupt systems to secure their land rights. Chiefs and ward administrators played a crucial role in facilitating these transactions, with chiefs directly involved in approving permanent structures, often demanding bribes. During election periods, politicians, such as Members of the County Assembly (MCAs), often leveraged their temporary power to acquire land for personal gain, thereby further entrenching corruption within the land administration system. Community leaders reported cases where politicians and informal land cartels targeted green spaces, as one community member noted during our site visits that: *'Public playgrounds and riparian areas were first fenced off, and then buildings appeared within months'* (Interview, women group leader, Pumwani-Majengo, September 2024).

Secondly, informal actors, particularly land cartels and ethnic networks, held substantial power, controlling land access through corruption and intimidation. These cartels altered land records, including title deeds and allotment letters, to displace rightful landowners. They also demanded a percentage of development budgets to facilitate projects, often using their influence over local chiefs and other formal institutions. A resident alleged that during the post-flood

demolitions in May 2024, poorer residents' homes were disproportionately targeted, while properties on riparian land remained untouched after reported payments of up to 4 million shillings (Interview with Pumwani-Majengo Resident, August 2024). The unequal application of laws, where wealth determines land security, highlights how financial capacity and political connections dictate land access, leaving the less affluent marginalised and vulnerable to eviction. This reflects selective enforcement and transactional governance, core forms of use change.

Thirdly, the privatisation of public spaces, particularly green areas, exacerbates the struggles faced by marginalised groups, particularly women, who rely on these resources for their livelihoods. As private developers increasingly take control of these spaces, women are coerced into relocating, often with little to no compensation. Field interviews revealed that multiple community leaders and land experts identified politicians and land cartels engaging in corrupt land transactions. Public reports (e.g., KOYARO et al. 2023) detail how politicians and cartels manipulate processes by disguising private land as government property while using official symbols to legitimise their actions. These practices not only deepen land access inequities but also widen the divide between those with financial and political power and the disadvantaged residents. Consequently, environmental conservation efforts are met with resistance from residents who fear displacement, and politicians avoid addressing these concerns to avoid backlash, further perpetuating cycles of corruption and land grabbing.

The appropriation of public green spaces by land cartels and a range of state and non-state actors, including public officials, local elites, developers, intermediaries, and migrant and local business networks, demonstrates how urban spaces are shaped by power struggles over resources and identity (ASANTE & HELBRECHT 2020, ANDERSEN et al. 2015). These practices, driven by economic gain, perpetuate socio-spatial inequalities where marginalised communities, particularly women, are displaced and excluded from these public resources (ASANTE & HELBRECHT 2020, NIKUZE et al. 2019). Corruption, clientelism, and opaque land transactions further entrench these disparities, aligning with global urbanisation trends where elite interests dominate, sidelining the needs of low-income groups (MARX 2016, HUCHZERMAYER 2011). As critical studies have indicated, this situation underscores the urgent need for inclusive urban planning that prioritises transparent governance and equitable access to resources, ensuring that the rights

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<sup>2)</sup> We define land cartels as (in)formal but highly influential networks of well-connected actors who conceal their involvement in urban land governance while manipulating allocation, tenure, and development. Operating in the blurred space between legality and informality, they leverage both legitimate and illegitimate resources to privatise communal land, displace residents, and repurpose green and open spaces. Their 'ghostlike' presence highlights the hybrid governance system in which formal rules are selectively enforced, deepening inequalities in settlements such as Pumwani-Majengo (OPANGA & MÜLLER-MAHN, in press).

of marginalised populations are safeguarded in the face of ongoing land commodification (CARRIER 2017, LANCIONE 2019, SCHARER 2018).

### 5.3 Displacement processes and mechanisms driven by socioeconomic enclaves

Since 2010, escalating rental prices associated with the transformation of Pumwani-Majengo have driven displacement, forcing long-term residents out and reshaping the neighbourhood into a socioeconomic enclave. This transformation is fuelled by weak land governance, where plots intended for public use are illegally acquired and rapidly developed for profit, thereby exacerbating environmental vulnerability. The drastic loss of green spaces signifies severe environmental degradation, leading to diminished biodiversity, poorer air and water quality, and reduced climate resilience. At the same time, the sharp rise in built-up areas reflects intensified infrastructure development and densification, which, while addressing housing and economic demands, has exacerbated issues such as displacement, overcrowding, and socioeconomic inequality. Together, these processes create new socioeconomic enclaves and intensify pressures for displacement.

Community members reported that private investors, including the Somali business community, have acquired large portions of land, leading to the displacement of households that could no longer keep up with rising costs. Residents are unable to afford the inflated rents, forcing many to operate informally or leave their homes. This economic exclusivity pushes original settlers out and reshapes the neighbourhood's economic landscape, as local traders are priced out and wealthier tenants take their place. High rental prices and selective leasing by property developers have reshaped the urban fabric of Pumwani-Majengo. As one resident observed, *"Once a green space is acquired, it is fenced off and transformed into high-rise apartments, which locals cannot afford"* (Interview, small-scale trader, August 2024). Participants frequently associated displacement with external investment, speculative construction, and selective leasing, which reinforced patterns of exclusion and created an increasingly segmented urban landscape.

Displacement has been driven by opaque land transactions and systemic corruption, deepening tenure insecurity and accelerating exclusion. Land sales occur secretly, often leaving displaced residents without warning. Moreover, corruption and legal

ambiguities further complicate matters, as residents lack formal land ownership documents, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by land cartels. Participants also reported the use of coercive tactics, such as intimidation and deliberate harassment, aimed at forcing households to sell (Interview, resident, July 2024). As a resident explained, *"Selling is done in secrecy... people just sell and quietly disappear"* (Life history interview, resident, Pumwani-Majengo, July 2024). A surveyor added, *"They change the title deed or allotment letters into their names and backdate it"* (Interview, surveyor, August 2024). They linked these practices to powerful investors and cartels, sometimes supported by local officials, who could manipulate legal procedures and obtain land through bribery and coercion.

These displacement mechanisms not only change land ownership but also deepen socioeconomic enclaves, reshaping the cultural and economic fabric of Pumwani-Majengo. This aligns with Urban Political Ecology (UPE) perspectives, which emphasise how land commodification and urban exclusion reinforce inequalities and create uneven urban environments (NIKUZE et al. 2019, MARX 2016, HUCHZERMAYER 2011). The disruption of communal life underscores the importance of transparent land governance in protecting vulnerable communities and promoting equitable urban development (FERNANDEZ 2012, ELLIOTT-COOPER et al. 2020, ACOLIN et al. 2021, SIMONE 2010).

### 5.4 Socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural impacts

As green spaces disappeared (cf. Fig. 2) and life became expensive, displaced residents were forced to relocate, often to peri-urban areas like Kamulu and Joska, where land remained affordable (Interview, resident, July 2024). This shift is further fuelled by the growth and development of socioeconomic activities in the area, as wealthier settlers take control, diminishing the influence of residents in decision-making processes. These processes have not only altered the social fabric but also contributed to the loss of communal green spaces. Our field observations confirm that as wealthier developers acquire land, former communal spaces are repurposed into commercial or residential developments. Interviews with community members support this observation, with one resident arguing that as green spaces declined, displaced residents moved to peri-urban areas like Kamulu and Joska, altering the neighbourhood's social and economic composition (Interview, resi-

dent, Pumwani-Majengo, July 2024). As the region becomes increasingly dominated by wealthier settlers, the socioeconomic challenges for long-term residents intensify, making it difficult for them to retain any meaningful stake in their neighbourhoods.

Socioeconomic effects in Pumwani-Majengo were also evident in the transformation of nearby markets, such as *Gikomba*, where frequent fires, which some participants perceived as intentional, may have forced small-scale vendors to relocate, often into residential areas. The forced relocation created economic instability, with traders being pushed out of established market zones due to high rents. This created opportunities for private developers and investors, including migrants and locals, to buy old plots and replace them with high-rises and commercial stalls. This shift destabilised livelihoods, blurred the distinction between residential and commercial zones, and increased overcrowding, thereby worsening living conditions. Participants also linked repeated market fires and rising rents to what they described as deliberate strategies to displace small traders and open opportunities for investors to replace low-rise housing with high-rise commercial developments (Interview with an NGO representative, September 2023).

Politicians and affluent investors have further compounded the problem, contributing to land grabbing by targeting prime market locations, as one of our participants noted: *"The profitability of the Gikomba market has drawn politicians into the business, driving land grabbing and exploiting the voiceless"* (Interview with a small-scale trader in Pumwani-Majengo, July 2024). As such, actors invest and continue to target these spaces; they not only displace vulnerable occupants but also repurpose them for commercial structures, thereby exacerbating socioeconomic impacts. The loss of public space has exacerbated urban heat effects, reduced climate resilience, and deepened economic inequality, as informal traders are left without affordable marketplaces. Residents noted that without adequate regulation, the rapid urban transformation risks permanently altering the landscape of Pumwani-Majengo, leaving its original residents without the means to reclaim their cultural history or secure sustainable futures, with one arguing: *"Ten to twenty years, the area would have changed completely... we are at the brink of losing the historical values, memories that the Pumwani-Majengo ward carries"* (Life history Interview, resident, Pumwani-Majengo, June 2024).

In sum, governance gaps and socioeconomic inequalities have enabled powerful actors, notably politicians, business networks, and economic elites,

to appropriate land for profit, displacing long-term residents and disrupting community cohesion and cultural identity, aligning with UPE's focus on the commodification of urban land (MARX 2016, HUCHZERMEYER 2011). This dynamic highlights how the privatisation of communal spaces, such as the *Gikomba* market, deepens socioeconomic divides, pushing residents into precarious livelihoods while enriching elites, thereby further entrenching urban inequalities (LOMBARD & RAKODI 2016, CARRIER 2017). The transformation of Pumwani-Majengo not only threatens its physical environment but also erodes its historical and cultural identity, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive, sustainable urban policies that prioritise the rights and needs of marginalised communities (BLOCH & MEYER 2023, ASANTE & HELBRECHT 2020).

### **5.5 Greening and ungreening as parallel but conflicting processes**

Processes of greening and ungreening in Pumwani-Majengo reflect conflicting goals among government, private sector, and community actors, creating a contested urban environment. Our findings reveal that various types of green spaces face different pressures: riparian zones are targeted by state-led 'green evictions'; playgrounds and school grounds are converted into commercial plots; markets are cleared through deliberate fires, while vacant lots fluctuate between encroachment and small-scale re-greening. These differences emphasise the complex mechanisms through which greening and ungreening happen in informal settlements.

Community-led initiatives, such as tree planting, that aligned with the national 30 percent tree cover target by 2032, were undermined by government-led infrastructure projects that converted some of the green spaces into social infrastructure. These contrasting activities underscore the dual role of the government in both promoting urban greening initiatives and contributing to 'ungreening' through urban expansion. This paradox was aptly captured by an NGO representative who noted, *"One green space was taken by the government for a sewer line... government agencies can sometimes disrupt our work"* (Interview, NGO representative, July 2023). Such actions reflect the tension between development priorities and environmental preservation, revealing the complexities of balancing infrastructure expansion with sustainable urban planning.

Our site visits indicate that, as government initiatives like Jaza Miti, private sector environmental Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and community-led efforts to promote urban greening exist alongside large-scale land privatisation, they frequently clash and undermine one another. For instance, while developers fund tree-planting programs, they simultaneously engage in land acquisitions that displace communities. In one case, a school playground in Kariokor was converted into a commercial complex despite community protests (Interview, resident, Kariokor, June 2023). On the one hand, national policies encourage tree planting and reforestation; on the other, the failure to regulate urban land conversions enables the sale of public green spaces for commercial projects. These contradictions expose fragmented land governance, where sustainability goals are subordinated to profit-driven urban development. Caught between these competing interests, residents themselves played a dual role in creating and destroying green spaces. Overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure forced them to encroach on road reserves and communal areas for housing and trade, while simultaneously engaging in re-greening activities, such as tree planting and environmental cleanups. This dual role highlights systemic challenges, including insecure land tenure and the lack of cohesive urban planning, which leaves residents vulnerable to eviction and further environmental degradation. Residents explained that overcrowding forces some to extend into road reserves even as they participate in re-greening activities, illustrating simultaneous destruction and restoration driven by livelihood pressures (Interviews, Gikomba resident, November 2023; participants FGD6, Pumwani-Majengo, February 2024). This paradox of destruction and restoration illustrates how residents adapt to systemic pressures, expanding into available spaces for survival while simultaneously investing in restoration practices to sustain their environment.

Despite these challenges, there is growing awareness and effort within the community to promote environmental restoration. Schools and community groups actively participated in tree planting, signalling a shift toward preserving green spaces and improving the quality of life. However, the lack of a regulatory framework to manage competing land uses undermined these efforts and perpetuated ad-hoc developments at the expense of sustainable growth. This precarious balance between environmental restoration and destruction remains central to the urban evolution of Pumwani-Majengo, as one resident highlights: *“We planted trees on Tree Planting*

*Day with our teacher... while others focused on school premises and open spaces. However, businesspeople and developers often grab them to build malls or houses or even conduct businesses there”* (FGD 3, Pumwani-Majengo, November 2023). This interplay of community action and unchecked development underscores the urgency of implementing a cohesive regulatory framework to protect green spaces in Pumwani-Majengo, as emphasised during our expert consultations. Experts emphasised that fragmented land governance and profit-driven land conversions mean national greening targets coexist with practices that rapidly erode the same green spaces (Interview, government official, November 2023). While grassroots efforts, such as tree planting and environmental awareness campaigns, reflect a growing commitment to sustainability, their impact remains limited without institutional support. Addressing these regulatory gaps is crucial to fostering a more balanced urban evolution that harmonises environmental restoration with the community’s developmental needs.

Pumwani-Majengo’s greening and ungreening processes exemplify the tension between environmental sustainability and developmental priorities, shaped by government policies, private sector interests, and community actions aimed at promoting greening. Yet, these efforts are often undermined by infrastructure development, profit-driven private sector land conversions, and governance structures that favour elite interests, exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities (ANDERSEN et al. 2015, MYERS 2008, ENGLESTAD 2003). The Situated UPE framework highlights the socio-political and economic complexities of greening in Nairobi’s informal settlements, underscoring the need for inclusive policies that integrate environmental sustainability with social justice (LAWHON et al. 2018). The ongoing conflict between environmental restoration and urban development in the settlement highlights the urgent need for comprehensive regulatory frameworks that protect green spaces while addressing the community’s growing housing and infrastructure demands.

## 5.6 Community responses

While some residents have resigned themselves to the disappearance of green spaces, others have engaged in various strategies to address the challenges of land commodification and displacement, balancing resignation with resistance. These legal actions, grassroots mobilisation, and everyday place-making practices reflect the community’s ongoing



struggle to assert its rights and maintain control over its environment. Legal action has been one of the most direct forms of resistance, but high costs and bureaucratic delays often limit its effectiveness. During interviews, community members described the challenges of securing land tenure, noting that despite filing cases and submitting letters and responses, they often faced delays or were left without a response. High legal fees rendered courts inaccessible for most residents, prompting some to bypass municipal bureaucracy by turning to local chiefs, who were perceived as more responsive. A few community groups have successfully resisted land grabs by retrieving historical title deeds, as one elder explained: *"We approached the Land Commission, which asked for documentation. Luckily, we had a copy of the original title deed"* (Interview, Community Elder, December 2023). These experiences highlight the uneven access to legal recourse and the potential of historical claims to reinforce tenure. Increasing affordable legal representation and financial support for grassroots organisations could enhance residents' ability to challenge land rights grabs. Beyond legal channels, residents have mobilised through petitions, demonstrations, and direct negotiations with authorities. Many expressed frustrations over being excluded from urban planning decisions, emphasising that *"we only hear about the plans when the bulldozers come"* (Interview, Resident, Pumwani-Majengo, 2024). Public protests and advocacy efforts have drawn attention to land injustices, though fear of retaliation discourages some from openly opposing development projects. One activist recalled past consequences of speaking out: *"Last time we protested, some of us were visited at night"* (Interview, Women Activist, January 2024). These accounts demonstrate the effectiveness and risks of advocacy, highlighting the importance of transparent channels of engagement between communities and planners.

When legal and advocacy efforts fail, residents turn to place-making strategies to assert their presence and resist displacement. Community-led greening initiatives, informal land-sharing agreements, and occupation of contested spaces have become ways of preserving local identity and preventing land acquisition by external investors. Youth activists expressed that their proposals for community-led development are often dismissed, deepening the feeling that local voices remain marginalised in formal decision-making (Interviews, Youth Activist and Resident, Pumwani-Majengo, 2023–24). These frustrations highlight the need for genuine consultation, where community perspectives influence urban planning.

While some residents initially accepted this displacement, growing resistance against land commodification has emerged, as communities assert their historical ties and demand greater participation in decision-making (LOMBARD & RAKODI 2016). This resistance, often manifested in grassroots mobilisation and legal advocacy, reflects the agency of marginalised groups in challenging socio-spatial injustices (CAMPOS-MANZO et al. 2020). However, the influence of land cartels and power brokers complicates these efforts, as non-state actors contribute to the erosion of land rights (ANDERSEN et al. 2015). Despite these challenges, community groups in Pumwani-Majengo continue to fight for transparency, legal recognition, and inclusive urban development, underscoring the need for a more equitable approach to land governance and environmental justice in rapidly transforming cities' priorities.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper sought to explore the appropriation of green spaces in Nairobi's informal settlement of Pumwani-Majengo, focusing on how competing interests, government initiatives, private sector priorities, and community needs shape their use, leading to displacement and socioeconomic transformations. The findings underscore four key themes. First, displacement in Pumwani-Majengo goes beyond physical relocation and disrupts the social, cultural, and economic networks that underpin community resilience. These disruptions compound vulnerability by undermining everyday practices, reciprocal support systems, and local livelihood strategies. Second, community responses to displacement vary, with some residents expressing resignation, negotiating compromises, or mounting active resistance i.e., legal challenges, petitions, and grassroots mobilisation. These responses demonstrate local agency even where power asymmetries are acute, but access to legal remedies remains uneven and often constrained by cost, bureaucratic delays, and threats of retaliation.

Third, greening and ungreening processes in Pumwani-Majengo occur concurrently and often function as mechanisms of dispossession, enclosure, and 'green eviction', selective environmental interventions, e.g., riparian clearances, redevelopment of parks, and infrastructure siting, that are politicised and that disproportionately burden marginalised residents. Framing greening as potentially dispossessive helps explain how sustainability rhetoric can be instrumentalised to justify exclusionary redevelop-

opment. Finally, land transformation has led to the emergence of socioeconomic enclaves, resulting in spatial fragmentation that privileges wealthier newcomers and external investors while marginalising long-term, lower-income residents. This process is driven by weak tenure, opaque transactions, and a mix of formal and informal actors seeking profit through the commodification of communal land. These findings challenge traditional views of urban green spaces as public assets, highlighting their role in serving elite-driven aesthetic and commercial agendas that fuel contestations, displacements, and dispossessions. This study makes critical contributions to understanding the socio-political implications of urban green initiatives in informal settlements. It demonstrates how the government's broader greening initiatives often overlook the historical and social significance of informal settlements like Pumwani-Majengo, turning these areas into flashpoints for conflict. The eviction of communities from their long-standing homes, followed by urban greening developments, reflects broader socio-political struggles and highlights the commodification of green spaces. Increasingly, these spaces are appropriated for private and economic interests rather than being treated as public goods (see, e.g., OPANDA 2024). Greening policies, while framed as essential for ecological resilience, frequently neglect the lived realities of informal settlers. Vulnerable communities are often excluded from decision-making processes, resulting in environmental projects that prioritise aesthetic or commercial outcomes over social justice and equity. Thus, the simultaneous processes of greening and ungreening reflect broader systemic inequities, where marginalised populations bear the brunt of urban development pressures.

Using a Situated Urban Political Ecology (SUPE) lens, the paper demonstrates that green spaces in informally governed, Global South contexts are contested terrains instrumentalised by diverse actors, and that greening policies can unintentionally amplify governance failures and tenure insecurity. This reframing offers a theoretical contribution by specifying how internal appropriation processes within informal settlements reconfigure environmental resources into commodified assets.

Moreover, it challenges urban development paradigms that prioritise ecological or economic growth over addressing social inequalities. It then emphasises how these inequalities are spatially constructed and perpetuated through governance structures, policies, and urban design, revealing the complex ways in which urban spaces are shaped by and re-

inforce power dynamics. It accentuates the need for more inclusive and participatory urban planning frameworks, alternative governance frameworks that balance ecological goals with social equity, and participatory decision-making processes that ensure the voices of marginalised populations are integral to urban planning. Yet, despite our contribution based on Pumwani-Majengo, further research is needed to explore whether similar dynamics of greening and ungreening initiatives exist in other contexts across Africa and the Global South.

The long-term impacts of simultaneous greening and ungreening processes warrant deeper exploration, particularly in understanding how these initiatives affect the sustainability and resilience of urban ecosystems in marginalised contexts. Additionally, the role of different actors (not just elites) in shaping urban greening policies across different settings calls for comparative analyses to better assess the broader implications of such trends and developments. Broadening the scope of inquiry to examine elite agendas in relation to citizen responses in urban development globally can advance critical discourse on the intersection of power, environmental justice, and equity. This will not only deepen our understanding and exploration of more just and sustainable development processes but also shed light on the varying capacities of urban populations to assert themselves and claim their rights in ongoing urban transformations.

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