



RESEARCH BRIEF

Structural Violence and Humanitarian Vulnerability among Children in Nairobi's Low-Income Areas

A Qualitative Case Study of Mashujaa in the Making

This research brief summarises a bachelor's thesis in Peace and Conflict Studies examining how structural violence can contribute to understanding persistent humanitarian needs among vulnerable children in Nairobi, Kenya. Mashujaa in the Making serves as the qualitative case study.

Peace and Conflict Studies · Oslo Nye Høyskole · 2026

Background

Humanitarian needs are often associated with armed conflict, displacement, natural disasters and acute emergencies. Yet persistent humanitarian vulnerability can also exist in societies that are relatively politically stable and not affected by active armed conflict.

Kenya provides a relevant context for examining this distinction. While the country has experienced periods of political stability and economic growth, significant social and economic inequalities remain. In Nairobi's low-income areas, poverty, rapid urbanisation and unequal access to education, healthcare, adequate housing and social protection continue to shape people's living conditions and opportunities.

For children, these inequalities can contribute to long-term vulnerability even when the wider national context is not characterised by war. The study therefore examines whether structural violence can provide a broader analytical perspective on humanitarian needs that persist outside situations of armed conflict.

Research Question

How can structural violence contribute to understanding persistent humanitarian needs among vulnerable children in Nairobi, despite Kenya being considered a relatively politically stable country?

Analytical Framework

The study draws primarily on **Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence**, complemented by **Paul Farmer's concept of social suffering**.

Galtung's framework broadens the concept of violence beyond direct physical harm. Structural violence refers to forms of harm embedded within social structures, where unequal distributions of resources and opportunities can restrict people's ability to meet basic needs or realise their potential. Unequal access to healthcare, education, income and other essential resources can therefore be analysed as structural rather than exclusively individual problems.

Farmer's concept of social suffering complements this perspective by connecting broader political, social and economic inequalities with people's lived experiences. It helps illustrate how structural conditions may become visible through everyday experiences of marginalisation, illness, insecurity and vulnerability.

Together, these perspectives provide an analytical framework for examining how humanitarian vulnerability may persist even in the absence of active armed conflict.

Method

The research was conducted as a **qualitative, theory-evaluating case study** using a deductive analytical approach. Structural violence was used as an analytical perspective to be assessed against the empirical material rather than treated as a predetermined explanation.

Research design: Qualitative case study

Case: Mashujaa in the Making, Nairobi

Primary data: Three semi-structured interviews

Additional data: Document analysis and secondary sources

Analytical approach: Deductive thematic analysis

Interview language: Swahili

The three informants held different roles within Mashujaa in the Making and were selected based on their experience working directly with vulnerable children and families. The interviews were supplemented by reports and secondary material from sources including UNICEF, the World Bank, UN-Habitat, IGAD and Kenyan authorities.

Key Findings

01 — Poverty and Unequal Access to Basic Needs

The empirical material highlights persistent challenges related to food, housing, healthcare and education. Informants described how economic insecurity can prevent families from meeting basic needs and create barriers to children's school participation.

The findings suggest that these challenges are interconnected. Economic hardship can restrict access to education and essential services, which may in turn limit children's opportunities for greater stability and security in the future.

From the perspective of structural violence, such inequalities can be understood not solely as individual circumstances, but in relation to broader patterns of unequal access to resources and opportunities.

02 — Vulnerability Extends Beyond Material Deprivation

The study also identifies neglect, violence and psychosocial vulnerability as significant dimensions of children's experiences.

The empirical material describes children exposed to neglect and different forms of violence within close relationships, alongside concerns about trauma, social exclusion and longer-term psychosocial consequences. Informants also reflected on how vulnerability and harmful experiences may continue across generations.

These findings suggest that humanitarian vulnerability cannot be reduced to material poverty alone. Economic hardship, insecure care arrangements, violence and social marginalisation may interact and reinforce one another, affecting both children's immediate security and their future opportunities.

03 — Humanitarian Needs Can Persist without Armed Conflict

A central finding of the study concerns the coexistence of relative political stability at the national level and significant vulnerability at the local level.

The empirical material points to poverty, unemployment, housing insecurity and perceived weaknesses in public support as factors affecting vulnerable families. Informants also described concerns related to institutional capacity and access to assistance.

The case therefore challenges an understanding of humanitarian need that is primarily limited to war and acute emergencies. The absence of armed conflict does not necessarily mean the absence of insecurity, marginalisation or serious humanitarian needs.

04 — Local Humanitarian Organisations Play an Important but Constrained Role

Mashujaa in the Making illustrates how a locally rooted organisation can respond to vulnerability through educational support, emergency protection, psychosocial support, care and structured activities.

At the same time, the empirical material identifies significant limitations related to resources and organisational capacity. Informants described situations in which the level of need exceeded the organisation's capacity to respond, requiring difficult decisions about whom it could support.

The case therefore highlights both the potential and the limitations of local humanitarian actors operating in contexts of persistent vulnerability.

Implications for Humanitarian Practice

The findings point towards the value of understanding child vulnerability at both **individual and structural levels**.

Immediate assistance remains essential when a child requires protection, food, healthcare, education or safe care. However, addressing an immediate need does not necessarily explain why that need emerged or why similar vulnerabilities continue to occur.

A structural perspective therefore encourages humanitarian and child-protection actors to ask not only:

“What has happened to this child?”

but also:

“What wider conditions have contributed to this vulnerability?”

This perspective can help connect immediate humanitarian responses with a broader understanding of the social and economic conditions shaping children's lives.

Conclusion

The study finds that structural violence provides a useful analytical perspective for understanding persistent humanitarian needs among vulnerable children in Nairobi's low-income areas.

The findings illustrate how poverty, unequal access to essential services, social marginalisation, violence and psychosocial vulnerability can interact and restrict children's opportunities. The case of Mashujaa in the Making further demonstrates how a local humanitarian organisation can respond to some of these needs while simultaneously facing limitations in resources and capacity.

The study does **not** conclude that structural violence alone explains humanitarian vulnerability. Rather, it argues that Galtung's framework, complemented by Farmer's concept of social suffering, contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how humanitarian needs can persist in communities despite the absence of active armed conflict.

Political stability does not necessarily mean security for every child.

Scope and Limitations

As a qualitative single-case study based on three informants, the findings are context-specific and cannot be statistically generalised to all children or low-income communities in Nairobi.

The researcher is also the founder of the case organisation. This position provided access to the field and contextual knowledge, while also introducing a potential source of bias. Reflexivity and analytical distance were therefore considered throughout the research process.

The findings should consequently be understood as **analytical insights from a specific case rather than representative claims about Nairobi or Kenya as a whole.**

About the Study

Field: Peace and Conflict Studies / International Studies

Institution: Oslo Nye Høyskole

Year: 2026

Research design: Qualitative, theory-evaluating case study

Case: Mashujaa in the Making, Nairobi, Kenya

Primary empirical material: Three semi-structured interviews

Analysis: Deductive thematic analysis

Theoretical framework: Johan Galtung's structural violence

Complementary perspective: Paul Farmer's social suffering

This research brief is based on the bachelor's thesis *Structural Violence and Humanitarian Vulnerability among Children in Nairobi's Low-Income Areas: A Qualitative Case Study of Mashujaa in the Making*. The original thesis comprises 10,046 words and was submitted in May 2026.

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