

# THE ROLE OF URBAN PARKS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: CASE STUDY OF KISUMU KENYA

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## Abstract

Urban parks are now viewed as an important part of the broader structure of urban and neighborhood development rather than just recreation and leisure facilities. While most of the world has recognized the multifunctional use of urban parks for development; the parks in Kenya and Kisumu Township in particular are suffering from lack of attention, poor maintenance, lack of development and underutilization. Also evident in most parks of Kisumu Township is lack of activities and basic utilities like public toilets, litterbins, benches and notice boards. The stakeholders of Kisumu Town do not seem to realize that parks can contribute to enormous social, cultural and economic development of the poverty stricken region. The aim of the study was to assess the utilization, investigate the benefits and analyze the factors influencing use of urban parks in Kisumu. Descriptive, cross-section research design was used where multistage cluster sampling technique was applied in sampling households and park users within seven wards of Kisumu Township and seven urban parks respectively. The study indicates that the poor maintenance and lack of adequate facilities had hindered optimal social, economical, environmental and educational benefits of the parks.

**Keywords:** urban parks, urban development, cross-section research

## 1. Introduction

Development of Urban parks dates back to the ancient times of the boulevard systems in Minneapolis and Kansas City. Beginning in 1859 when Frederick Law Olmsted, Calvert Vaux and more than 3,000 laborers created Central Park in United States of America, a wave of enthusiasm for urban pleasure grounds swept America and the world over (Harnik, 2003). Urban Parks in this study refers to specific

piece of ground, excluding natural parks, within the City/town and set apart for use of the general public. It may be planted with trees, lawns and other shrubbery and include facilities for sport, entertainment and recreation. The term parks and urban parks are used interchangeably in this study.

According to Ondiege (1999), urban development and planning regulations in many developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America have failed to provide orderly and sustainable urban development. The result is that squatter settlements and informal sectors development have continued to predominate in spite of official approved urban development plans. Parks and other public protected area have suffered on the same note of failure to provide orderly and sustainable development by the governments. Modern town planning, as it is defined in specialized literature, provides the image of an art and science placed at inhabitants' disposal irrespective of the organization of places they live in (villages, towns or cities). It aims at stimulating the complex growth of locations according to their potential and inhabitants' expectations by accomplishing short-, medium- and long-term growth strategies (Lordache and Cebuc 2009).

Urban planning is an instrument of town management. In the past, when it turned from an operational instrument into a legal duty, it became useless. Planning, as it has always been, is undergoing changes towards what they believe to be a more efficient working way. What looks a trend of the last decades is its market orientation, more precisely demand orientation, so that it can promptly meet it. Low *et al*, (2005) wrote that in this new century, we are facing a different kind of threat to urban parks not only one of disuse, but of patterns of design and management that exclude some people and reduce social and cultural diversity. Most parks in Kisumu Town were created in the 1940s and 50s. The English settlers had an interest for recreational gardens and parks as this was in line with the interests of their countries of origin.

During the early town planning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the basic layout of the town was done, provision was made for six urban parks which currently are, Market Park, Jamhuri Park, Uhuru Garden, Owen Park, Taifa Park, and Maendeleo Park, which are all located in Kisumu Township. Most of these parks acquired their current names after Kenya attained independence in 1963. The parks were created to provide relaxation for the white settlers at different strategic points of interest, which included, residential, administration, market and bus terminal. These parks were not only supposed to live up to the old glory of providing relaxation points for the current residents but were expected to transform with the new global trend to provide avenues for social, economic, cultural and environmental activities. This study therefore shows the social-economic benefits of parks to development of Kisumu Town. It

indicates the levels of utilization of the urban parks and some of the factors affecting their optimal use and accessibility.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model used in this study integrates concepts by Hanley et al. (2003), and Harnick (2003) and portrays how urban parks usage is dependent on various alternative uses available as well as availability, accessibility and management of park facilities.

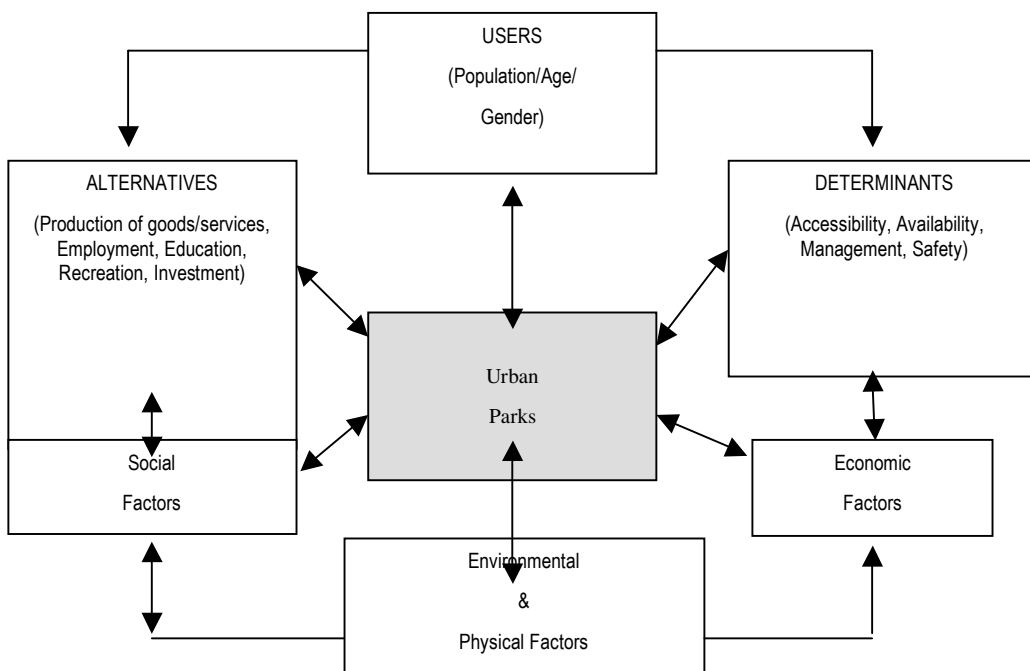


FIGURE 1: URBAN PARKS UTILIZATION CONCEPTUAL MODEL  
Source: Adapted from concepts by Hanley (2003) and Harnik (2003)

It shows the interrelationships between social, economical and environmental factors in relation to urban parks development. Physical factors were also considered key to understanding park utilization and development. This conceptual framework was used as a basis to identify the link between demographic characteristics and park utilization. This framework was used because it integrated the important aspects of the urban parks in terms of social, economic and environmental development. It outlines the key factors and elements affecting optimal use of urban parks in Kisumu. The framework also provides a set of guiding principles important in understanding urban parks and development, they include, alternative uses of parks, the users, the determinants as well as the factors affecting the parks. This conceptual framework asserts that one must consider the interplay of several factors in order to understand parks and social economic development of Kisumu Township.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Socio-economic Factors and Urban Parks*

The economic benefit of parks helps to raise property values, create quality townscapes and therefore, build business and community confidence. According to Trzyna (2005), the quality of parks provides a quick and highly visible indicator of whether an area is an attractive place for people to live and for economic activities to thrive. The potential of parks in enhancing and contributing to the changing economies of towns and cities should therefore underpin regeneration programmes. Individuals, businesses and communities derive social-economic benefits from parks in a variety of ways. Urban parks in Kenya are scarce compared to the areas and population they are meant to serve.

According to Goede *et al* (2001), in the twenty first century a new type of scarcity has emerged and that is the insufficiency of healthy environments to work and live in. These environments include space for urban green. This new shortage is reflected in a decline in air, water and soil quality as well as in a general decline in biodiversity. Park managers should broaden their objectives and seek to ensure that the parks they manage serve their communities the best way possible. They need rigorous information about the characteristics and needs of park users, potential uses.

Usership surveying is a potentially valuable tool for park managers as Kisumu is a fast growing town with numerous demographic, socio-cultural, economic and environmental changes. Usership surveying therefore would be particularly beneficial as a guideline for improvement of existing and development of new urban parks. Sustainability is an important concept for today's planners and an increasingly enlightened public especially in connection to social and economic development. Sustainable economic development occurs when progress towards environmental and social sustainability occurs within available financial resources. But, according to Gilbert *et al* (1996) securing such resources may in the long run impose a financial burden on future generations, which may detract social and economic sustainability to the extent that debt and its repayment perpetuate low concentrations of resources and power. The concept of sustainable development has been interpreted in many different ways. According to Sticklin & McClendon, (2000) the guiding principle of sustainable development is that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainable development recognizes the interdependence of environmental, social and economic systems and promotes equality and justice through people empowerment and a sense of global citizenship. Satterthwaite (1999) noted three major aspects of sustainable development: meeting

human needs; sustaining or keeping intact natural capital at local, regional and national levels; and ensuring that human activities or values can be sustained Sticklin & McClendon (2000) stated that building sustainable communities is about improvements to the places where people live and work, and giving them the chance to play their part in shaping change for a preferable future. The principle of sustainable development is important in planning and development of urban parks. A lot of problems in urban parks of Kenya and Kisumu in particular are related to poor maintenance and lack of facilities. Sustainable economic development principle if applied to management of urban parks in Kisumu would ensure better management and use of the parks. We need to achieve a sense of social cohesion, cultural inclusion and people empowerment in management of urban parks.

### ***Social Benefits of Urban Parks***

Sampson *et al* (1997) demonstrated that a neighborhood's collective efficacy-with one another and their capacity to work together to achieve shared goals, can reduce crime and disorder even in very poor communities. Coley *et al* (1997) noted that urban parks can play a unique role in building the relationship that constitute social capital. Good quality parks can provide opportunities for voluntary and community activities that can benefit the less fortunate in the society. Some parks in Kisumu for instance have been used to reach out to the street families and parking boys.

Well-managed parks can therefore create welcoming environments for vulnerable groups like children and wheelchair users, helping them to socialize and take part in community life. Parks help to build community cohesion by getting people to engage with each other in partnerships. In terms of equality for all sectors of society, free access to parks offer a uniquely affordable alternative to commercial leisure activities.

Parks also play the useful functions of providing a space for civic interaction. Political and social rallies are sometimes held in parks, although in Kenya there is a trend towards holding such functions in sterile, concrete stadiums. Access to public parks and recreational facilities has been strongly linked to reductions in crime and in particular to reduced juvenile delinquency.

### ***Educational and Health Benefits of Urban Parks***

Parks are increasingly used as an outdoor classroom for school subjects such as environmental studies and provide valuable venues for research projects. As a result, they can help rekindle the relationship between urban residents and the natural world. According to Conner (2005), Urban Parks provide an opportunity for research partnerships with universities, scientific and industrial research organizations to examine a wide range of biophysical, economic and cultural issues related to park and visitor

management. They can also provide work experience and learning opportunities in environmental management and educational opportunities. Urban Parks therefore if well established can serve as laboratories for biologists, geographers, environmentalists as well as social scientists.

### ***Environmental and Ecological Benefits of Urban Parks***

Urban areas need to be drained to remove surface water, but the impermeability of many built surfaces raises the probability of flash floods. Urban green protects soils and moderates harsh urban climate for example by cooling the air, reducing wind speed and giving shade (Tyravainen *et al*, 2005).

Healthy environments lead to healthy economies and societies. Parks are pollution ameliorators and help counter the pollution, which can make cities unbearable and unsustainable. Urban parks with well-maintained vegetation act as physical filters helping to reduce air pollutants such as sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide. They also help in reducing the rate of ozone production and in capturing dusts and volatile organic compounds.

Urban parks with tree vegetation are a major contributor to stabilizing the urban climate, they serve as lungs for towns and cities and counter pollution by removing particulates from the air, adding oxygen and removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere They promote the idea of ecologically sensitive towns and cities by providing wildlife corridors and are havens for many birds, animals and wildflowers. Parks contribute to land reclamation by establishing trees and woodlands on the many derelict and degraded lands in urban areas, it is an inexpensive option for improving the appearance, enhancing their ecological value and making them available for recreation.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### ***Area of Study***

The study was conducted in Kisumu Township, which is in Kisumu District, Nyanza Province Kenya. Kisumu is the third largest city in Kenya. It is the headquarters of Kisumu District as well as Nyanza Province, as is shown in figure 2. It stands on the shores of Lake Victoria, the second largest fresh water lake in the world, at an altitude of 1160 meters above sea level.

Kisumu Municipality is divided into 8 locations namely: Central Kisumu; East Kisumu; Kajulu East; Kajulu West; Kolwa East; Kolwa West; South West Kisumu and Kisumu Township. Kisumu Township is further divided into seven wards namely Aerodrome, Railways, Kibuye, Kaloleni, Market, Stadium and

Milimani. The seven urban parks studied are found within these seven wards. The parks, include Uhuru Gardens, Jomo Kenyatta Ground, Jamhuri, Central, Taifa, Market and Maendeleo Parks.



FIGURE 2: MAP OF KENYA SHOWING POSITION OF KISUMU TOWNSHIP  
Source: <http://www.worldbank.org/research/povertymaps/kenya/ch4> (February 6, 2009)

Descriptive and cross-sectional research design was used in this study. This was a non-experimental and analytic type of design that involved a descriptive study of the urban parks in Kisumu Township and survey of a cross section of the population in Kisumu Town with different socio-economic classes and from multiple age groups. Each of the seven parks were observed independently for a period of one week Monday to Sunday to enable observation of the trend of activities and attendance. Household questionnaires were administered face to face by the researcher to 70 household heads within the seven wards of Kisumu Municipality.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Household heads interviewed comprised of 54% female and 46% male. The age distribution of the respondents showed that 60% were aged between 35 and 45 years, 21% between 18 and 34 years, 17% were aged between 46 and 56 years while 2% were aged over 57 years. Educational attainment of household heads interviewed indicated that 44% had attained education up to middle level colleges.

### *Park Utilization*

There was 100% awareness of existence of at least one or more urban parks within Kisumu Township among the household respondents. There was 100% awareness of existence of parks irrespective of how long one has lived in Kisumu Town. Those households who actually visit parks were the majority (60%) while 40% of respondents did not visit them, despite their awareness. 45% did not visit parks because of lack of interest and this was one of the most prevalent reason for the same.

This lack of interest was due to a number of reasons, which included the fact that parks did not have good facilities and were in poor maintenance condition. Some respondents considered the parks far from residential areas and also unsafe. 15% of household respondents did not visit parks because they did not consider them to be safe.

Safety issues involved the fact that most of the poorly maintained parks like Taifa and Maendeleo were hibernated by drug peddlers and urchin. Lack of facilities of interest was another reason for not visiting the parks, 20% of respondents indicated they do not visit parks because parks have no facilities or activities that they were interested in. Generally these facilities included picnic facilities, shades, toilets, benches, and play areas for children. JKG was observed to have had several activities that were attractive to women, this included kiosks selling women merchandize, sporting facilities, which attracted women groups. The peripheral of JKG also had street vendors selling variety of items ranging from clothing to food staff.

A part from JKG, Market Park was the only other park most attractive to women folk and this was mainly because of its being used as an open-air market. Children were the least users of parks because the parks were not children friendly in terms of having children play facilities and activities within the parks. None of the seven parks had any special arrangements of children friendly activities that could include, "merry-go- rounds" and swings. Poorly maintained parks like Taifa and Maendeleo recorded the least number of attendances however, the different roles and activities offered in different parks still influenced attendance for instance, Market park, although poorly maintained still attracted people because of its being used as an open air market.



### ***Functional Roles and Benefits of the Parks***

This multi-functionality of parks is of great importance since the number and categories of users for each of the different types of activities could indicate the urban parks success rate. The socio-economic function of urban parks is production of goods and services through for example employment, education and investment. Employment for instance is important for development, maintenance and governance of the parks. Education on the other hand plays a role in disseminating educational information to all manner of people on diverse issue of environment, health, governance and culture. The functional roles and benefits of the parks were realized mainly through observation carried out by the researcher.

### ***Economic Activities of Parks***

It was noted that the urban parks in Kisumu had various economic activities that were contributing in one way or another to income generation and self-employment opportunities. Market Park had been turned into an open-air market and although encroached by hawkers was providing employment opportunities and income generation to hundreds of residents. Majority (90%) visited Market Park to buy or sell merchandize although street preachers also occasionally used the park. There was also a pay-public toilet at the park that provided sanitary services to the many users as well as income for the MCK who manned the facility. Market park therefore seems to be losing its role as an urban park for recreation and relaxation purposes but instead had become wholly an unstructured economic enterprise and this had impacted negatively on the outlook of the park as was evident by the damaged vegetation and plenty of dust.

JKG had several income generating facilities, which included kiosks, toilets, sporting pitches, conference facilities and a cyber café. Owen Park section of JKG was also used by commercial, small-scale photographers who took advantage of the beautiful scenery and took pictures of interested park visitors. Maendeleo Park is a relatively small park that had suffered more due to poor maintenance and use as a dumping site. What was left of the park were few tall trees that had survived the hard times of lack of attention. The only viable activity at the park was the presence of several cyclists. Apparently the park is a venue for bicycle repair services and a source of employment and income generation to quiet a number of people especially the youths who are the majority in the business of “boda boda” (commercial bicycle cyclists) as shown in figure 3.

Uhuru Park did not have much of economic activities except a few kiosks located in its periphery and also being a station for plumbing services whose sign is placed on one of the tree trunks in the park. Taifa Park did not have any notable economic activities within the park but had several kiosks selling

refreshments within its periphery. There were no notable economic activities in Jamhuri Park. Central Park is the smallest among all the Parks and it seemed not to have opportunities for much economic activities due to its size and being located at the heart of Kisumu Town it was seen more as an artistic Park.



FIGURE 3: BICYCLE AND MOTORBIKE REPAIR STATION AT MAENDELEO PARK

### ***Recreational Activities and health Issues of Parks***

Jomo Kenyatta Grounds had a few recreational facilities that included sporting fields, and a restaurant. Despite its relatively large size, an observation of attendance for a period of one week revealed that out of the total attendance of all the parks only 14% of male, 3% of female and 4% of children visited Jamhuri Park and only 11% chose Jamhuri Park as their favorite Park. This means that the park was not optimally utilized despite its relatively large size. The Park had a big shed stand that was often used for various recreational activities like drama. Other than JKG and Jamhuri Park there were no special sporting facilities in the other Parks. Jamhuri Park had a large open ground that was often used for motorbike riding and bicycle cycling.

### ***Educational and Environmental Activities***

Jomo Kenyatta Grounds had several educational facilities, which include a demonstration site for wastes, fishpond, cyber café and a mini library. Also at the JKG's, Owen Park had a historical monument in memory of Archdeacon Owen and at Uhuru Park there was a monument structure built in

commemoration of Kenya's independence of 1963. However the fountain was damaged and the important historical information on the monument had rubbed out. Central Park had an educational structure showing direction of major African cities from Kisumu town. It was noted that this park had well maintained vegetation including trees and flowers that also improved the aesthetic value of the Town center.

There were no signs of positive educational or environmental activities in Maendeleo, Taifa, Market and Jamhuri Parks despite there being a lot of potentials for these activities. There are several educational Institutions within Kisumu Town which could use the great educational resource potentials of urban Parks. Apparently this resource had not been well utilized or given due attention by these institutions. This was evident by the poor environmental conditions of most of the Parks. Learning institutions within the peripheries of the parks can contribute a lot in terms of dissemination of knowledge as well as maintenance of the Parks, but there was no evidence that they were involved with the parks. Due to the environmental condition of most of the urban parks, the environmental conservation benefits were greatly missed out. This was evident by the presence of litter and use of some Parks as dumping sites. Evident in Taifa, Market and Maendeleo Parks were plenty of litter and dumping sites within the Parks as seen in figure 4.



FIGURE 4: DUMPING SITE AT MARKET PARK

It seems that the Parks have fallen prey to irresponsible citizenship and have become vulnerable for easy dumps by residential and commercial premises around them. These Parks did not seem to be duly protected by the environmental by-laws as they have been totally ignored. On the other hand, there were a few grown trees in all the Parks but there was little indication in most of the Parks that

more trees were being grown to improve the environment. JKG had well maintained vegetation and provided plenty of shades for its many users as shown in figure 5. Jamhuri Park although poorly maintained was quiet rich in vegetation. Generally, the parks were underutilized as an environmental resource and as an informational tool that could be useful in dissemination of information to the public through avenues like historical structures, demonstration sites, notice boards, bulletin boards and suggestion boxes.



FIGURE 5: PARK USERS RELAXING IN A WELL-MAINTAINED AND ATTRACTIVE JKG

#### ***Social-cultural Activities of Parks in Kisumu Town***

A few Parks in Kisumu town, mainly JKG and Uhuru Park, provided reservoirs for collective memory as mentioned earlier and contain monuments, memorials and fountains that should showcase contemporary sculptures although this had been hampered by poor maintenance. The Parks were also used for church functions, political rallies and also political discussions by groups of residents. In addition the Parks also served as meeting venues for different women and youth groups. JKG is considered as “Aguch Kisumu” meaning it the melting pot of Kisumu and is a meeting place for social and cultural activities. JKG also held other activities that promoted cultural values by providing venue for selling African ornaments and regalia. Jamhuri Park was oftenly used by youth groups from the neighboring Nyalenda slums to rehearse drama and plays that touch on social-cultural issues like HIV and AIDS.

## 6. Factors Influencing Use of Parks

### *Accessibility*

The most frequently used mode of reaching the park was by foot (48%) for both household heads and onsite park users. The other modes of getting to the parks were by vehicle (31%) and by bicycle (21%). For users of parks whose means of reaching the park was by foot, more than half (68%) took up to 20 minutes while 32% took more than 20 minutes. Those who came to the parks by foot came from either their work places or home. The transport infrastructure, indicates that the parks are fairly accessible in terms of proximity to and availability of main roads, secondary roads and footpaths. Also contributing to the fairly good infrastructure are the easily available means of transport.

The parks are therefore accessible to those living or working within the periphery of the park as well as those living further away but within the Township as most frequently used means of the reaching the parks was by foot. Due to proximity of JKG, Market, Maendeleo, Central and Taifa Parks to the transport infrastructure and the Central Business District they are more easily accessible. Jamhuri Park is the furthest removed from the CBD and from public transport routes and could be said to be the least accessible of all the parks although it had a good connectivity of road network for private transport. Only 10% did not visit the parks because they felt the parks were too far. 19% of users found in the Parks were from out of Kisumu Township therefore the parks are fairly accessible even to people living out of Kisumu Township.

### *Inhibitions to use of Parks*

The inhibitions to use of the Parks were mainly concerned with lack of facilities and maintenance thereof. One of the factors hindering use of parks was that there were no benches to sit on in all study areas except Taifa Park. The few benches found in Uhuru Park were greatly damaged. Also lacking were toilet facilities in Jamhuri, Uhuru and Maendeleo Parks. Another major inhibition to use of the Park according to the Park users was lack of adequate shades to shelter users from the scorching sun. Poorly groomed trees especially in Market and Maendeleo hindered provision of adequate shading, and the long grass was a health hazard.

## 7. Conclusion

Urban Parks in Kisumu Township are generally underutilized with Taifa, Maendeleo, Central and Jamhuri being the most poorly attended as compared to JKG, Uhuru and Market Parks. There seem to be a relationship between park facilities, maintenance and the number of people visiting the park

because Parks with more facilities and activities attracted more users. Children were the least users of Parks in Kisumu and the main reason being that there were no children friendly activities or facilities within all the parks. The social-cultural set up of the communities living within Kisumu Township was a key hindrance to female utilization of the Parks as more male than female visited the Parks and yet statistics from MCK indicate that female population exceeded male population. Each Park had a unique characteristic in terms of its size, facilities and location. Generally economic activities were the most common and therefore it can be concluded that the Parks perform more economic roles than social-cultural, educational and environmental functions. Through the many economic activities the parks provided opportunities for income generation and employment to the community. The parks had great potential as an Educational resource but were poorly utilized for that purpose. Environmental benefits of the Parks vegetations were greatly hampered by pollution caused by using some Parks as dumping sites as well as poor maintenance of existing vegetation. Underutilization of some of the Parks is not due to poor accessibility since the transport network of the town is fairly well established.

Under-investment in urban parks by the government of Kenya through the local authorities and lack of facilities is a major obstacle to improving the quality of Parks in Kisumu Town. However financial constraints, maintenance and lack of facilities were not the only factor affecting the declining of urban Parks. Another factor contributing significantly to the decline was unstructured use of Parks for commercial purpose through encroachment by hawkers who had contributed to overcrowding and pollution, which in turn had affected the serenity and beauty of the urban parks.

## 8. Recommendations

The following general recommendations were drawn to enable optimal utilization and sustainable development of urban parks in Kisumu Township: Degenerated and underutilized parks should be revamped through the initiative of MCK, collaborative efforts and contributions of environmentalist, cooperate bodies, NGOs, Educational Institutions, donor communities and the local community who should also be empowered on effective urban park utilization and management.

MCK should take serious charge of the Parks through proper maintenance and provision of basic facilities like benches, shades and toilets. The government should review its policies on park management to enable allocation of more resources and the system of management and financial sourcing in JKG be replicated in the other parks since it had proved to be successful. MCK should enact tough penalties for those littering Parks or using Parks as dumping sites and plant more trees in all the

Parks to improve on the environmental benefits. Regulations and penalties reminders should be posted on all Parks to put the park on check and to control misuse and littering.

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