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Kenya's Kibera kid savours stardom



By Tomi Oladipo
BBC, Nairobi

A new film set in Africa's largest slum Kibera - often associated with poverty and crime - hopes to shatter its negative stereotypes.

Kibera lies just outside the heart of the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, and is home to more than 1m people.

The densely populated slum is a collection of squalid mud huts, corrugated iron shacks and shelters covered with plastic sheeting, with no sewage pipes, no roads, no water, no toilets, in fact, with no services of any kind.

But the makers of the 12-minute film, *Kibera Kid*, believe there is more to the slum than the stories of suffering and gloom that too often make it into the news.

The internationally acclaimed film tells the story of a 12-year-old orphaned boy Otieno and is shot entirely in the slum, starring local actors.



"I am very happy because I am the first person from Kibera to succeed in acting"

Ignatius Juma

Following a botched robbery, Otieno is forced to choose between saving an innocent man's life and his gang called the Razors, the only family he knows.

Fourteen-year-old Ignatius Juma, who plays Otieno, has taken to his new-found stardom with ease.

"I am very happy because I am the first person from Kibera to succeed in acting," he says.

"For me it is easy because I also act in school... Now, I am used to being treated like a star."

The film has awakened his dreams of making it big as an international film star.

Unless, he says, he succeeds in his first ambition to become Kenya's president.

'Wrong image'

Kibera Kid is the second film from Hot Sun Films, a
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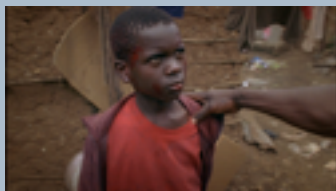
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community-based charitable trust, and is currently showing at film festivals around the world.

The trust aims to give slum residents an opportunity to tell their stories to the world using local knowledge and resources, including volunteers, to produce low-budget films.

Nathan Collett, an independent US filmmaker who is the group's co-ordinator, says the project has been received with a lot of enthusiasm from Kibera residents.



There are plans to turn the short film into a feature length movie

"They give us their ideas, and we see how we can make it happen," he says.

"We're not interested in giving people money; we are imparting knowledge and giving them an opportunity to do it themselves."

Hot Sun Films was inspired by and borrows its name from Kenya's informal jua kali industry.

In Kiswahili jua kali means hot sun and refers to crafts people who make their merchandise on the streets, rather than in a factory setting.

However, Kibera Kid has fallen wide of its intention for some at home.

"Some people have been complaining that we are taking the wrong image abroad that Kenya is very poor," says Godfrey Ojiambo, one of the film's producers.

"But the truth is that Kibera exists and it is a slum."

“ Don't say that I don't have a talent, so because I'm in Kibera I can't do anything ”

However, he said that by focusing on one person's story the film becomes a tale of hope - and it also empowers Kibera residents to develop solutions to the problems they are facing.

Ignatius Juma

He also expressed the hope that the film would inspire other Kenyans to get involved in efforts to improve the quality of life in Kibera.

And Ignatius says there is an important lesson Kibera residents can take away from the film.

"Always work hard," he says.

"Don't say that I don't have a talent, so because I'm in Kibera I can't do anything."

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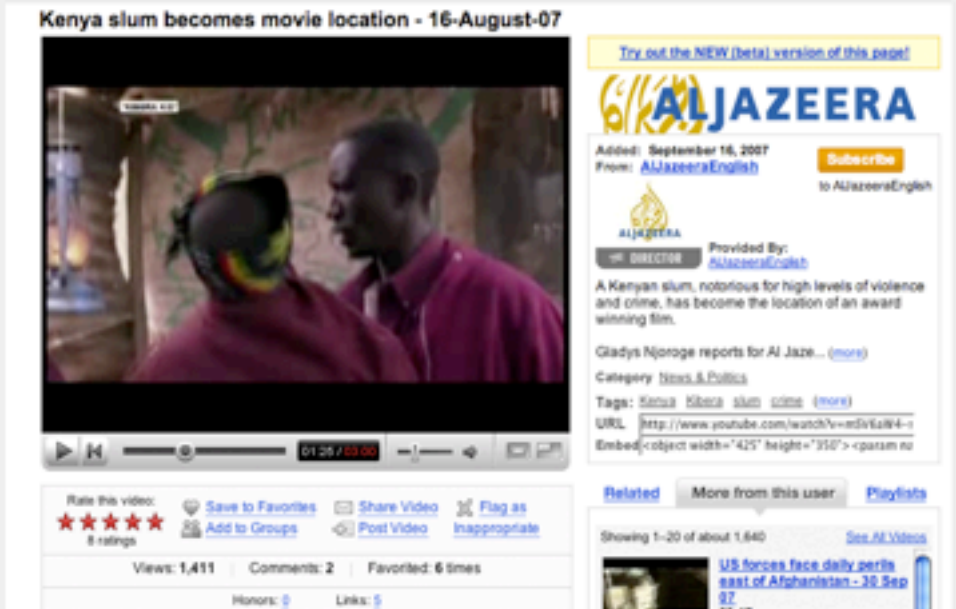
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BBC Network Africa "Pick of the Week"

Monday 30th July

Africa's largest slum - Kibera in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, doesn't normally elicit good news. It's usually associated with filth, crime and the common suffering of the poor. A group of young people are hoping to change this; Hot Sun Films, is exploiting talent among the slum's youth. Already they have come up with a successful project, a short film entitled Kibera Kid. The 12 minute production has already won international acclaim. Well our man in Nairobi *Tomi Oladipo* has been speaking to its producers and sent this report.



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From Deutsche Presse-Agentur
(Germany/Worldwide)

Kenya's Riverwood hopes to make a splash on film scene

By Tia Goldenberg May 14, 2007, 10:05 GMT

Nairobi - A melee of reggae music, hip-hop and jumpy African beats blares from the row of shops in downtown Nairobi, Kenya's capital.(omitted).

....Aside from Riverwood, short films are popular and have won Kenya some acclaim. **Kibera Kid**, a 2006 12-minute film about a boy growing up in a Nairobi slum who has to choose between gang life and redemption, won an Emmy Award among several others and was screened at the Berlinale Film festival in Germany. Its Kenyan-based American director Nathan Collett said he is planning a feature-length film based on **Kibera Kid** which he hopes will have the same impact as South Africa's Academy Award winning movie Tsotsi. 'This film has the potential to have a large impact on a bigger stage. It can make people realize what is unique about Kenya and offers a view they would never have the opportunity to see,' Collette told Deutsche Presse-Agentur dpa. He argued that while the 25,000 dollars spent on the short film is not small-change for ordinary Kenyan filmmakers, the funds can be found with a little digging in corporate sponsorship. And while he acknowledged Riverwood's popularity, he said shooting for a global audience should be the country's goal.



'Kenyan runners don't just compete in local races. They go to Boston, New York and London. The film industry has the same international potential. We need to think big.'

Slum boy shines in award-winning international film

Kibera child with no prior acting experience played lead role in the acclaimed movie, writes ARNO KOPECKY

Twelve minutes was all it took to change the life of Ignatius Juma. That's the play time of *Kibera Kid*, an award-winning film Juma starred in at the age of 12.

Rare as it is for any Kenyan to take a lead role in an internationally acclaimed movie, it is literally unheard of for a ghetto child with no prior acting experience.

But *Kibera Kid* may be a sign of things to come. After winning the Best Short Film category at the 2006 Kenya International Film Festival, a feature-length version of the same title is now in the works.

Like the original, it will be shot entirely on location in the sprawling Kibera, showcasing an all-locals cast with a home-grown plot that describes life in Africa's second largest slum.

Juma, now 14 and remarkably self-possessed, is still young enough to play the lead role a second time round.

"I'm very lucky," he acknowledged during a recent interview outside Olymple Primary School, just a few metres from the Kibera home in Nairobi he grew up in. "Not many people get the chance I did," he confesses.

That chance came courtesy of

producer/director Nathan Collett, who scoured the length and breadth of Kibera to find someone to play a lead role in his film.

"We were looking for someone who was confident and relaxed," Mr Collett told the *Saturday Nation* adding that "Juma was the most outgoing of them all."

Kibera Kid, is reminiscent of the Brazilian movie *City of God*, which likewise stars slum residents in their home setting. "I just acted like normal," Juma says, adding that the movie was a fair portrayal of life in Kibera.

Born and raised in the slum, Juma speaks from experience. His father abandoned the family seven years ago, leaving his mother Mary Wabwire with nothing.

For a long time, Ms Wabwire struggled to feed her four remaining children (two went with the father) by vending water.

Brief period

Unable to afford school fees, Juma spent a brief period in the streets until an Australian missionary heard of Ms Wabwire's story and gave her Sh1,000 as business capital. She was able to start selling candles from a stall, paving the way for Juma to return to school. To this day, however, the family seldom manages more than a single meal a day.

"You know, I've seen many kids join gangs, and I came close myself," Juma said, who despite the ongoing hardships greets the future with a smile. He is now working on a rap album with a friend and

A feature-length version of the same title is now in the works and will be shot in Kibera, showcasing an all-locals cast



ABOVE: Ignatius Juma, 12, displays a DVD of the 'Kibera Kid' movie in which he played the lead role. LEFT: Juma and another actor Godfrey Ojiambo take a walk in the sprawling Kibera slum in Nairobi. PHOTOS/CHRES OJOW



says if acting doesn't work out, he might try to become president some day.

"When people saw me act in a movie, they saw anything was possible," he says.

Godfrey Ojiambo, who plays opposite Juma as Kibera Kid's ruthless gang leader, can only agree.

"Both in the plot and in real life, Juma is a role model," he said. "The movie shows that there are other ways to make it than just the gangs." Yet Ojiambo, 27, admits that it hasn't always been easy. A native of Kibera himself, he spent time in the gangs

and speaks of the movie's accurate portrayal of that life.

"There were things people told me to do that my character now tells others to do," he said. What's more, acting hasn't always been the easiest alternative," he says.

"The Kenyan movie industry is not rising as fast as we hoped it would," he said, noting that "for a long time it was just about money, about how fast producers could make a buck. Corruption was a problem, because good roles would often go to bad actors just because of who they knew."

Looks better

But with the backing of Mr Collett, the future looks better than ever for Juma and Ojiambo. "People are starting to realise it's not just about money, it's about quality," Ojiambo said.

Nowhere is this more true than in the original "Kibera Kid," which was shot on such a tight budget that none of the actors were even paid. "But the exposure made up for it," Ojiambo asserted.

Ojiambo and Collett were equally happy that both versions of the film promote pure Kibera talent.

As for Mr Collett, he hopes the movie will mark the beginning of a new trend for Kenya's fledgling movie industry and the actors who struggle to make a living by it.

Daily Nation, AUGUST 4th, 2007

Daily Nation Sunday Feb 25 2007

FILM / MWANGI GITHAHU

Ghetto life and hip hop culture in focus

Last weekend Nairobi hosted its first ever Hip Hop Film Festival.

Taking movies set in slums around the world, from Nairobi's Kibera, to the projects of New York and other US cities, to the *favelas* (Portuguese word for ghetto) of Rio de Janeiro the Hip Hop Film Festival is in the words of co-organiser Nathan Collett, "the first ever film fest focusing on hip hop and ghetto life".

"Our vision is to broaden the understanding of ghetto life and encourage discussion among people from different backgrounds," said Collett, who made his own ghetto movie, the award-winning *Kibera Kid*.

The films were screened for free at the

National Museums of Kenya, Kibera and the US embassy in Nairobi.

Hot Sun Films, the organisers of the festival, say they were inspired by Kenya's *jua kali* (informal sector) tradition.

The film company, which was behind *Kibera Kid* and *The Oath*, takes pride in the fact that they use indigenous methods and know-how to make movies, using locals and people from low-income communities to "interpret their own history and culture in film."

Kibera Kid is one of the Kenyan films screened at this year's Berlin Film Festival between February 7 and February 20.

Speaking of prize-winning Kenyan films, Salim Amin, the chief executive of-

ficer of Camerapix of Kenya, has been selected by the World Economic Forum as a Young Global Leader 2007. He was picked from a pool of over 4,000 candidates.

Awarded each year to the world's most distinguished young leaders under the age of 41, this honour was bestowed on Amin "to recognise and acknowledge his professional accomplishments, his commitment to society and his potential to contribute to shaping the future of the world."

His peers in the current community of 416 Young Global Leaders include Larry Page and Sergey Brin, co-founders of Google; and Mikheil Saakashvili, President of the Democratic Republic of Georgia.



Big Dreams for Kibera 'film star'

«Pg 1

Young actor Ignatius Juma is an ambitious young Kenyan. The 14-year-old dreams of starring in major films in Hollywood before becoming the president of Kenya. His determination came about after he starred in the short film 'Kibera Kid', shot in the city's largest slum, Kibera. The film has earned accolades across the world.

Banking on the success of the film, Juma firmly believes he has what it takes to be one of the world's top actors and movie stars. In 'Kibera Kid' Juma plays the role of Oriens, a 12-year-old orphan living with a gang of petty thieves, the 'Razors'. After an aborted robbery, he is forced to choose between saving an innocent man's life - the only family he knows - and the gang. Juma chooses the former and finally quits gangster life.

'Kibera Kid' is the second film from Hot Sun Films, a community-based charitable trust in Kibera, and is currently showing at film festivals around the world. The trust aims to give slum residents an opportunity to tell their stories to the world using local resources, including volunteers, and to produce low-budget films. Nathan Collett, an independent US filmmaker who is the group's co-ordinator, says the project has been received with a lot of enthusiasm by Kibera residents and across the world.

The film delivers a message of hope to young people living under difficult circumstances and in harsh environments.

All the actors in the film are from the Kibera slums where the film is set. Juma says he is really happy with the worldwide fame he has earned, thanks to the role he played in the film. "This short film has earned several awards and I am happy to watch myself on international TV channels like CNN and Al Jazeera," says Juma with a smile. Juma says there is an important lesson Kibera residents can

learn from the film: "Always work hard whatever your circumstances."

"Don't say you don't have a talent, and so because you live in Kibera you can't achieve anything. I'm also from Kibera. I didn't know that I would ever be a good actor. When the opportunity comes, you should try to use it to succeed," he advises. Looking back, Juma says it was not easy getting to where he is. The film took six days to shoot. "I had to alter my daily programme because by 6 am all of us had to be at the location."

In fact, Juma says his mum was not of the idea of him taking part in the film but he managed to convince her to let him try "just once". "I became so tired the first day and I was actually getting sick and my mum thought that I was being wasted by the producers," he recalls.

Juma believes he is naturally an actor only that his talent is yet to be fully exploited. He says when he first went for auditions, he shocked everybody with his ability to master the lines in two days. "They were surprised because I was able to master the lines even faster than some established actors."

But that was not all that gave him advantage over eight others who were short-listed for auditions. "They also liked my confidence which of course is vital in acting."

Juma owes his success to hard work. "I have also been involved in acting at school and this has helped me to be confident," says Juma, the Class Seven pupil at Little Prince Primary School.

The ever-untiling Juma hopes the short film will change the perception people have of Kibera. He blames the deplorable state in which Kibera and other slums are in due to bad leadership. To him, currently there is no politician who can really make change in the area including his MP Raila Odinga who is also vying to be Kenya's next president.

Says he: "If it were my wish then all the MPs we have should be sent home because none of them care about the people who take them to parliament instead they care about themselves and their families."

'Kibera Kid' has so far earned seven awards. The film won the Emmy student award category last year at the prestigious Emmy Awards. It has also bagged the Best Short Film at the Kenya International Film Festival, Best Kenyan Film at the Lolla Film Festival and Best Directed Film at the Angelus Film Festival in USA. Its other awards include the Graduate Student award at the Regions International

Film Festival, Most Innovative Short Film at the Real to Reel Film Festival in Canada and Best Youth Film at the Denville International Film Festival in USA.

The success of 'Kibera Kid' goes on to prove that even those living in poverty cannot be held back from stardom. In fact, plans are underway to produce a full-length version of the film.

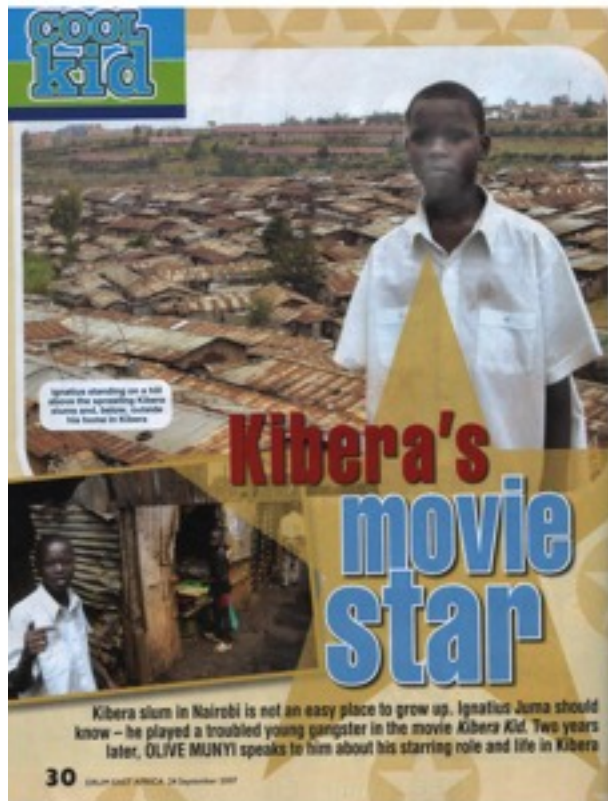
Juma believes there is more to Kibera slums than the stories of suffering and gloom that too often make it into the news. In future he says he wants to be a lawyer before making it to politics. "If I become a leader of this area then no one will refer to Kibera as a slum. I will do away with the slum and ensure there is proper housing for all," he concludes.

forinfo@nation.co.ke



Ignatius Juma during the interview with 'Young Nation' in Nairobi's Kibera slum.





Ignatius at home with his mother and, below, copies of the film Kibera Kid, in which he starred

How did you start to act?

Since class four I have always participated in the plays that our teachers write for us at Little Prince Primary School. I am also well known in my school for addressing parents' gatherings and assemblies. I am not shy.

How did you get selected for the movie?

It was some time in late 2004 when I was 12 years old. A group of well-dressed men found my friends and I playing football in Kibera one afternoon. They asked who among us could rap for them. They took our contact details and we did not see or hear from them for a while. In 2005 they came to our school to look for us. Out of eight boys, two of us were selected but I was to play the main role.

What was Kibera Kid about?

It showed how Kibera children live and how they tackle each day. The film was set in Kibera because the main interest was to show the world that there are so many children in Kibera who do not have parents. They are forced to live on the streets, beg or engage in crime or prostitution.

Are you an orphan?

No. I live with my mother and I am second born out of four siblings. I also have two other half-siblings, who left with our father a couple of years ago.

What role did you play?

My name was Othman. I was a boy who had been orphaned by AIDS and ended up doing bad things in the slums to survive. I was able to show the mistreatment such children go through when their parents die.

Why did you volunteer?

When we were selected, we were told that it was on a voluntary basis and that we could not be paid. Because I had always wished to act in a movie I did not think twice about it. I wanted to boost my acting skills. I had been selected out of many other children, so I knew that I must be good at acting. My mother also

told me to try it out instead of wasting time on the streets after school.

Did the film really show life as it is in Kibera?

Yes. The film was real in that most children in Kibera lack the opportunity for education. If their parents die, they resort to crime to survive. Kibera Kid has won many awards. My acting was very natural, because I am from Kibera.

Where was the filming done?

We filmed from 6am every day in Kianda, Makina, Olympic and other areas. It took 10 days.

What was the hardest bit?

Previously I had only acted in our school plays, which did not last more than 10 minutes. During filming I discovered that movies are different. I had to do one scene over 20 times until the director was satisfied. I got really frustrated in the beginning, but later realised that with patience I could learn a lot.

Did it benefit you in any way?

I learnt a lot about how cameras operate from the cameraman, who was from America. I also did not know I could act for over 12 hours a day. I learnt that, if one is not patient, it is impossible to succeed in acting. I acted with many professional actors, both from Kenya and America. They taught me a lot and boosted my confidence.

Has your life changed since making the movie?

I was not paid for acting in the film so I did not benefit materially, but I learnt how to memorise a lot of information. This has helped me in my coursework. I tend to recall a lot of things we have learnt, especially during examinations. My acting skills have also greatly improved - I am more self-confident now. I hope that one day my family and I will make enough money to move to a quieter neighbourhood.



Do you think actors make a lot of money?

I doubt whether theatre pays people well in Kenya, because most of the people who act are not wealthy. What I do not like is that when people or companies come to shoot a movie in Kibera they bring other people from posh neighbourhoods to pretend to be from the slums and then pay them lots of money.

What do you like about living in Kibera?

I knew that many people think living in Kibera is bad. However, even though people here are not rich I like the way they are always united. Unlike in other neighbourhoods where people live far away from each other, here it is difficult to suffer alone. People are always willing to do whatever they can to help. That is what I love most about Kibera.

What do you hope to become in future?

I want to continue acting because I am very talented and it is my hobby. However, I want to become a lawyer so that I can enter politics and become president.



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P/18 | DICIEMBRE 2007 | CARACAS 22 | Cine y Audiovisual

Nathan Collett



Acerca de su filmografía

Nathan Collett ha vivido en varios países: Australia, Pakistán, Estados Unidos, Venezuela y actualmente en Kenia; lugares en los que se exhibe mucho cine comercial. Esto lo ha llevado a plantearse como meta que los habitantes de dichos países puedan ver novedades cinematográficas, y es por eso que ha tratado de llevar a ellos su filmografía más significativa. Entre los trabajos audiovisuales más destacados de Collett se encuentran: *Looking to the Past* (2000), documental basado en el renacimiento de las religiones tradicionales en Kenia y *The Oath* (2005), un cortometraje dramático que trata el tema de la rebelión de los mau mau, en 1952, en contra del colonialismo inglés. Asimismo, destacan: *Sobira* (2007), cortometraje dramático que cuenta la historia de una niña que trata de actualizarse, dentro de una sociedad conservadora; además de *Kibera Kid* (2006), cortometraje que el autor define como su obra más significativa.

Hay que cambiar la visión que se tiene de África

Kibera Kid, será transformado en un largometraje, para ayudar la reconstrucción del continente

Yulifer Gómez Blanco

Editor, productor y guionista norteamericano, Nathan Collett, comentó que Venezuela está viviendo una época de cambios muy significativos en la cinematografía y el documental, y agregó que "el apoyo que está prestando la Cinemateca Nacional, no tiene nombre y debería ser tomado como un ejemplo positivo en el mundo entero".

"Me siento sumamente contento y orgulloso de que mi película *Kibera Kid* (Chico de Kibera), haya participado en el Festival de Cine Africano 2007, aquí en Venezuela, ya que esta había transitado anteriormente por, al menos, 35 festivales a escala mundial, pero ninguno de ellos llegaba a tantas personas al mismo tiempo", explicó.

Collett expresó que lo más significativo para él, con relación a *Kibera Kid* es que "para realizar este trabajo audiovisual, tuvimos que compartir con los chicos de Kibera, que es el barrio popular más grande de África, y trabajamos juntos para editarle, al mundo entero, los verdaderos cuentos de África. Porque mucha gente sabe de este continente, pero no conoce las cosas buenas que en él existen. Hay mucha pobreza, pero también hay mucha más esperanza y posibilidades creativas".

Por otra parte, Nathan Collett explicó que su trabajo audiovisual, no parte necesariamente de la idea del documental, ya que esta busca, mayormente, informar. "En este caso no se trata de trabajo y yo he conseguido hacerlos cumpliendo de los habitantes de Kibera, escuchar sus anécdotas y sus vivencias, para así llevarlas a la pantalla, y que se vea reflejada en ella "el culture y sus ideales".

Inspiración como elemento fundamental

Desde muy joven, Collett se mostró muy interesado por la vida cara de la historia africana, es por ello que, en cuanto tuvo la oportunidad, decidió estudiarla a fondo, tanto así, que su tesis de grado, presentada en la Universidad de Stanford, California, se basó en ella.

Asimismo, desde el estreno de *Kibera Kid* hasta hoy se han venido desarrollando ciertos sucesos cinematográficos, que hacen pensar a Collett, que el impacto de su película ha sido muy significativo.

"Se han realizado varios documentales sobre la vida en Kibera, se creó una red de socios de *Kibera Kid* como largometraje, se ha llevado a cabo el entrenamiento de jóvenes para la realización de guiones, la búsqueda de locaciones y la creación con técnicas de filmación, además del Programa de Cine Popular de Kibera, en el Centro Cultural Alianza Francesa, Nairobi y Kenia (2007)", explicó Collett.

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Ultimas Noticias, Dec 22nd 2007, Caracas, Venezuela