MOMBASA
Gateway to Africa

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Strengthening Africa's economic performance

THE BRENTHURST FOUNDATION

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Executive Summary

This paper, part of the Brenthurst Foundation's Future of African Cities project, draws on documentary research conducted throughout 2018–19 and on fieldwork during 2019 in Mombasa and surrounding coastal districts. It examines the city through the lens of its gateway role, and the tension between that role and the interests of Mombasa itself. The paper explores the contrast between coast and hinterland, the trade-off between hardware and software, and between practical and aspirational goals. Like other papers in this series, it suggests ways in which other African cities might learn from Mombasa.

Mombasa has been a trading hub for a millennium, connecting inland Africa with global sea-borne trade. Under the Portuguese empire and the Sultanate of Zanzibar the city's Swahili traders ranged far inland for slaves and for up-country commodities, which they sold onward in exchange for a huge variety of global goods. The slave trade drew the ire of the British in the early 19th century, but Britain's 'dog-in-the-manger' attitude to East Africa meant it was only German interest in the region, after 1884, that provoked London to colonise Kenya.

The Uganda Railway, built in the late 1890s, opened up Kenya, connected the coast with the Great Lakes region, transformed Mombasa into a rail and shipping hub, and spurred urban growth, but imposed stresses on the city's water supply, sanitation and housing. It also brought a power shift – from coastal to inland regions, Mombasa to Nairobi, and Swahili to up-country population groups. These groups, who spearheaded the push for independence from Britain, have dominated Kenya since 1963, contributing to regional tensions that still affect Mombasa today.

As the city has grown, the balance between hardware – transport, infrastructure, the urban fabric – and software, including health, education and, more recently, digital telecommunications and computing, has become a key issue. Coastal and religious tensions led separatists and jihadists in Mombasa to engage in violence and terrorism in the early 21st century, prompting harsh crackdowns that only exacerbated the problem. Since Devolution, under Kenya's new 2010 constitution, the re-organised County Government of Mombasa has focused on inclusive, locally-consultative means to prevent and counter violent extremism, with considerable success. The same consultative approach infuses the city's approach to urban upgrading, infrastructure development, and the improvement of economic opportunities. Yet insider-outsider, and coastal-inland tensions still remain – notably in the uneven (and in many ways quite negative) impact of the Chinese-funded Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) built in 2016–18 to replace the collapsing British-built railway. Highly aspirational plans for Mombasa's growth to 2035 can seem quite unrealistic in this context, but the city's track record since devolution, of consultative engagement, public consultation and practical, realistic approaches to funding and implementing of projects, suggests that Mombasa will offer many lessons for other African cities in the future, even as its history offers both positive and negative insights about what it means to be a Gateway to Africa.

Introduction

In 1593 King Philip II of Spain, at that time also King of Portugal, ordered his subjects to build a fortress guarding the wonderful natural harbour at Mombasa, on Africa's Indian Ocean coast. Philip was still smarting from the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588; having put off earlier plans, he now renewed his push to control Mombasa, with its food and fresh water supplies, and its strategic location as an ancient commercial hub trading as far afield as Persia, India, China and Oman.[1] Given Philip's geopolitical competition with England and the Netherlands, both now seeking to exploit his Armada defeat, it made sense to secure a forward position on Africa's east coast.[2] A base at Mombasa could control waters north to the Horn and south to the Cape, trade with the Swahili Coast, and protect communications with the Portuguese colony at Goa in India, while securing for Philip (and denying to his rivals) the Indian Ocean trade.

Philip never visited Africa; he thought of Mombasa as many have done, before and since: as a gateway to other places. But the town and its people were here for centuries before the Portuguese, Arabs or British arrived, and even since independence in 1963 the insider's perspective has often been very different from that of outsiders, as we shall see. Philip's fortress – Fort Jesus, today a United Nations World Heritage site – has changed hands many times since its completion in 1596. It anchored a new city on Mombasa Island, turning a cluster of fishing huts into the core of a dynamic urban area that today houses 1.4 million people and is one of the most important ports on Africa's east coast.

Gateway to Africa

The Republic of Kenya's second-largest city and only major port, Mombasa is also the largest commercial harbour in East Africa and a logistics and infrastructure hub for the western Indian Ocean. The city's container terminals, at Kilindini Harbour and Port Reitz, along with the newly-completed, Chinese-funded Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) to Nairobi, connect Kenya to Uganda, Rwanda,

Burundi and the wider African Great Lakes region, making Mombasa a critical node in the global supply chain, and giving the city access to an international market of more than 500 million people across the central region of the world's fastest-growing continent.[3] Likewise, four (soon to be six) submarine cables – fibre-optic telecommunications links whose landing stations in East Africa are all at Mombasa – make the city a digital hub with cheaper and faster internet, cable and telephone access than the rest of Kenya, and indeed many other parts of Africa.[4]

Mombasa is indeed the gateway to Africa. It is also a vibrant and diverse cultural, residential and commercial centre in its own right, with its own interests and needs. The city remains deeply affected by its trading role, its strategic location on the East African seaboard, historic tensions between inland and coastal regions and religions, and global great-power competition. Today that competition plays out, not among the long-decrepit European empires of the past, but between the rising global power of China, its rivals in India and the Middle East, and its principal geopolitical rival, the United States.

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A History of Connection and Exploitation

The Portuguese cared little for Mombasa's hinterland. As a maritime empire they looked to the ocean, valuing the city mostly as a sea base with links to their other coastal possessions; as a result, they interfered little in local administration, seeking

primarily to control trade.[5] When the Portuguese were expelled from Mombasa in December 1698, it was by another seafaring empire: the Omani Arabs.[6] Sailing trading *dhows* and fighting ships from strongholds in Muscat and Suhar, the Omanis had built a commercial network across the Indian Ocean by the 10th century CE, bringing spices, dried fruits, salt fish, grains and nuts to Mombasa from Arabia, and trans-shipping dates, carpets, saffron, rice, coffee, textiles and ceramics from India, China and elsewhere in Africa.[7] Coastal traders exchanged seaborne goods for gold, ivory, slaves and commodities from the hinterland.[8] Mombasa – sitting on an island at the junction of two large estuarine inlets, each with its own freshwater creek and multiple access points into the hinterland – was ideally placed as an intermodal transportation hub to connect inland producers with overseas markets.

Mombasa under the Sultan

The city's growth under the Omani sultanate reflected this trading role, enhanced by the emergence of Islam as a major religion along the entire coastline of East Africa: many Mombasa merchants converted to Islam (which in East Africa, as in Southeast Asia, was a trader's religion, spread more by commerce than the sword).[9] Although converts to Islam were undoubtedly sincere, there were also distinct commercial advantages to the new religion. Conversion allowed merchants to avoid the *jizya* tax levied on non-Muslims, enabled them to prove their trustworthiness to trading partners, and let them access globalised financial services – including the ability to write a cheque in Mombasa and cash it in Morocco, Cordoba or Bandar Aceh – only available to Muslims.[10]

As under the Portuguese, Mombasa experienced significant local autonomy within the Omani sultanate, which 'was less an "empire" than a commercial enterprise loosely bound by political agents and mercenary debt collectors, heavily reliant upon the consent of local Arab and Swahili elites in the major coastal towns'.[11] Swahili city-dwellers in Mombasa, Muslim by religion and of mixed Afro–Arab descent, pushed trading routes into the interior, seeking up-country commodities for onward sale to Zanzibar and Oman.[12] In 1832, under Seyyid Said, the sultanate relocated its capital from Oman to the island of Zanzibar, establishing a clove-growing industry, raiding inland for slaves to work the new plantations, and creating the slave-trading *entrepôt* (with an outpost at Mombasa) for which Zanzibar became infamous.[13] Swahili traders penetrated east and central Africa: they built bases, stationed armed retainers to protect caravan routes and established representatives at the courts of inland rulers, but (like the Portuguese before them) did not seek to govern up-country regions.[14]

The slave trade drew the ire of the British, who (having outlawed it throughout their dominions in 1807) spent much of the 19th century hunting down East African slavers and reducing their strongholds.[15] It was the unilateral action of one British naval officer – Captain William Fitzwilliam Owen of Her Majesty's Sloop *Leven* – that first brought Mombasa, whose local Mazrui rulers were then in a power struggle with the Busaidi Sultan of Zanzibar – under British protection.[16] Without Admiralty permission, Owen sailed into Mombasa harbour in February 1824, agreed to a Mazrui request for a protectorate (thereby helping the locals fend off Zanzibari control) and extracted in return a promise from local leaders to end the slave trade.[17] The *Leven's* crew established itself in a house – today named for the ship and registered as a national monument – in the Old Town, only for British authorities to rescind Owen's unauthorised protectorate in 1826.[18] But Mombasa, in part because British ships continued their anti-slavery blockade, remained relatively independent of Zanzibar despite the Sultan's nominal sovereignty.

Gateway to the Scramble for Africa

As in Owen's case, unauthorised private actions played a key role in the spread of colonialism throughout East Africa in the 19th century. By the late 1840s, European missionaries and traders had established themselves, without approval, across the Great Lakes region in modern Malawi, Uganda and Tanzania, and were clashing with slavers on the Congo River.[19] London was in no hurry to extend itself in Africa, though it did continue to suppress slavery.[20] British policy was instead one of 'dog-in-the-manger'. England was quite happy to

keep out of East Africa so long as other European powers did the same.[21]

But in 1884 another unauthorised adventurer upended this balance. German explorer Carl Peters penetrated inland and, without permission from Berlin, signed treaties with rulers in the hinterland of today's Tanzania and Rwanda; prompted by pro-imperialist public opinion, the Kaiser extended a protectorate over the area.[22] The challenge having been raised, Britain moved immediately to block Germany. In the 'scramble for Africa', Britain acquired inland colonies and eventually colonised Kenya, but Mombasa was still seen as a gateway – an access point to more important inland areas such as Lake Victoria, the Rift Valley or the fertile highlands around Mount Kenya – rather than as a key centre in its own right. Indeed, 'the territory now known as Kenya was for some years to figure in the minds of British statesman only as the site of a railway, the Uganda Railway'.[23]

As the journalist Daniel Knowles noted in 2016, 'the history of modern Kenya starts with the railway. Sir Charles Eliot, the commissioner of British East Africa who presided over its construction,

proclaimed after the task was completed that: "It is not uncommon for a country to create a railway, but it is uncommon for a railway to create a country." He was pompous but he wasn't wrong. Without the train, Kenya – a colonial confection that brought together dozens of tribes in a territory drawn with a ruler on a map – would not have come into existence. Nairobi, a city which a century ago was little more than a few streets built around the station, would never have turned into much more than that.'[24]

That railway (construction of which began in 1896 and was completed in 1901) connected Uganda to the coast at Mombasa. It sparked massive urban and commercial growth in Mombasa, and enabled the development of Nairobi and the highlands, which – by reason of their temperate climate, fertile soil and abundant agricultural labour – became the centre for British colonial rule and the dominant economic and political region within the new Kenya Colony. Indeed, by one estimate, virtually all development in Kenya, throughout the country's history, has taken place within 200 miles of the railway.[25]

Learning from Mombasa: The Centrality of Infrastructure

As other African cities consider major projects – road and rail transport, commercial ports, petroleum and electricity infrastructure – Mombasa's experience (and that of Kenya more broadly) offers positive and negative lessons. The railway made Mombasa, establishing it as the critical intermodal transport hub linking a vast inland area of Africa to the global economy. The development of Kenya can be explained (in spatial, economic and also ethnic-political terms) through the impact of

Mombasa's railway and the port. Infrastructure became the skeleton around which the colony, and later independent Kenya, took shape over multiple generations. Thinking ahead – 30 to 60 years – and considering both the known and predictable impact of major projects, and the obvious fact that many market effects and political impacts of those projects are non-linear and (by definition) not predictable, can help anticipate the potential stresses and strains.

Growing while losing influence
Despite rapid growth in Mombasa, the even-faster growth of inland regions caused a power shift, from coastal to inland areas and from Arab and Afro-Arab coastal populations to inland Africans, with implications that still resonate for Mombasa today.[26] Whereas coastal Swahili traders, backed by

the Sultan of Zanzibar, had held the upper hand over up-country populations for decades, under British rule Mombasa – along with a ten-mile strip running the length of Kenya's coastline, which still fell under the Sultan's sovereignty – rapidly lost influence even as the city grew.

Mombasa's urban footprint and demographic makeup shifted significantly during the 68 years of British rule, with rapid growth and the emergence of commercial agriculture and shipping industries transforming the city and its peri-urban areas.[27] An influx of Indian and Middle Eastern workers and businesspeople, encouraged by colonial authorities, increased social and residential diversity, with the Old Town now surrounded by administrative, residential and industrial districts. The local fishing industry – always a staple activity in Mombasa – expanded rapidly, while a belt of agricultural and market-garden cultivation emerged around the city to supply food for its growing population.

The urban area expanded well beyond its original footprint on Mombasa Island – new port and rail facilities appeared at Kilindini Harbour west of the island and at Port Reitz further up the same inlet, and informal settlements proliferated.[28] Factories, warehouses and marshalling yards sprung up around the docks and the railway. Newcomers flooded in from other parts of Kenya, drawn by better-paying jobs, freedom from the exploitative contract labour arrangements that were prevalent in many parts of the rural hinterland, and by the energy and prosperity of the gateway city.[29]

The first big problem triggered by this growth appeared in Mombasa's water supply. The city had traditionally relied on wells bored into the coral rock of Mombasa Island.[30] But by the early 20th century, rapid urban expansion depleted these wells, making water and sanitation major concerns. This too was an effect of the city's gateway role, with water shortage caused 'by the enormous increase in commercial and industrial use associated with the railway, and with the volume of shipping now calling at Mombasa … The railway, desperate for water, was pumping inferior supplies from boreholes further along the line of rail, and damaging its engines as a result. The quality of water from Mombasa's wells was deteriorating rapidly, as aquifers were over-exploited and human waste from the growing population began to affect some wells.'[31] There was also commercial competition: 'Mombasa's two harbors … could earn considerably more revenue if they were able to supply water to ships, as Zanzibar did. In 1906, a scheme to develop a deep-water pier at Mombasa's Kilindini

harbor had been shelved when it was realized that in the absence of a good water supply, such investment might well be wasted.'[32]

As a consequence, the colonial government undertook a major infrastructure project in 1911–1918 – at considerable cost in lives lost to disease, and in labour unrest – to pipe water from the Shimba Hills, 33 kilometres southwest of the city, to Mombasa Island. Ironically, the flood of inland people fleeing coercive labour recruiters for that project, along with improved water supply and sanitation in Mombasa, only accelerated the rural-to-urban migration whose effects the project was designed to ameliorate.[33]

An urban explosion

From a population (centred on Mombasa Island) of just 15 000–20 000 people in 1897 – which an Admiralty handbook noted as chiefly consisting of Swahilis, Arabs, a few mainland people and a thriving Indian business community – Mombasa grew rapidly throughout the 20th century.[34] By 1931 the population had reached 40 000, double its precolonial level.[35] By the 1950s, 4 000 new African immigrants were arriving each year in Mombasa, attracted by the city's opportunities, or fleeing up-country violence generated by the Mau Mau insurgency, and by British measures to suppress it – notably the 'villagization' program, which displaced a million Kenyans from inland settlements.[36] Mombasa's urban population swelled, reaching almost 200 000 by 1965. This skyrocketing growth (a tenfold increase in just two generations) led to fears by coastal Arab and Swahili populations that they would be swamped by up-country immigrants.[37]

Demographic change also disrupted land tenure, with unprecedented numbers of squatters occupying the estates of absentee landlords in Mombasa and along the coastal strip, a problem that has persisted into the modern era.[38] As one recent analysis noted, 'people at the coast can feel a shared sense of grievance against "up-country" people [but] there are multiple tensions within this imagined coast community – notably over land. Many people at the coast are squatters, and while some denounce "up-country" people, others are equally quick to accuse Arabs of having

dispossessed them, especially on the southern half of the coast.'[39] The most obvious impact of this pattern of land tenure in Mombasa has been the spread of informal (slum) settlements. A system where land 'is owned by a few individuals, who rent out land on condition that only temporary structures can be developed … has caused the establishment of informal settlements, causing significant environmental degradation' and leading many urban-dwellers – if not an outright majority of people in Mombasa – to be officially considered 'squatters'.[40]

Coast Versus Hinterland

As a practical matter, until independence Mombasa and the coastal strip were governed from Nairobi under the Kenya Colony, but in legal terms the coast remained a separate Protectorate of Kenya, leased from the Sultan of Zanzibar and administered by Britain on his behalf.[41] In the early 1960s, as independence approached, this became a source of serious tension in and around Mombasa. 'Arabs and other coastal African groups fearing upcountry domination of the ocean-side region mobilized around the idea of coastal "autonomy", or *mwambao*, and variously theorized that the area could become an autonomous province of Kenya, Zanzibar or an East African confederation.'[42] This spooked people in Mombasa, 'many of them

migrants from upcountry, [who saw *mwambao*] as "a political issue aimed at Arabs dominating over the Africans in this town". Little more than half a century since Arab and Swahili planters, as well as many urban households, held enslaved Africans in bondage, the specter of Arabs seizing power again was a potent political issue for Africans on the Kenyan coast, as well as in Zanzibar.'[43]

The movement for independence from Britain, including the bloody Mau Mau uprising, was spearheaded by inland groups such as the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru of the central highlands, and the Luo of far-western Kenya.[44] Unsurprisingly as a result, Kenya since independence has been dominated by a series of political coalitions and patronage networks that draw support from powerful up-country populations. Inhabitants of coastal regions – including Mombasa – have felt disenfranchised politically, even as the city has played a critical role in ensuring global trading and economic access for the rest of Kenya. Indeed, as one researcher noted in 2017, in some areas, 'feeling is widespread that the upcountry has, since independence, lived parasitically off of the coast … The sense of a coastal sovereignty separate from mainland Kenya has survived, and offers coastal residents an emotionally attractive if thus far impractical alternative to [what some see as] the ignoble patronage competitions of Kenyan national politics.'[45]

Learning from Mombasa: Legacies of Colonialism

Like almost every other major African city, Mombasa has been shaped by the legacy of colonialism, which – though only lasting for a relatively brief period of 68 years – coincided with massive urban growth in and around the city, and across Kenya as a whole. Legacies of colonialism include urban-planning decisions that drove the placement of critical infrastructure, the rise of informal settlements in former colonial labour estates, Mombasa's relationship with national-level institutions, and the power-shift from coast to inland, and its associated ethnic, religious and regional separatist tensions. But Mombasa has chosen to be defined by its future rather than its past, and has adopted a strongly consultative approach to dealing with its diverse population. As other cities continue to deal with the legacies of colonialism, this future-focused, inclusive approach (especially in the area of urban upgrading and countering violent extremism) is well worth studying.

Discontent and Devolution

For Kenya's first 50 years of independence, from 1963 until 2013, Mombasa was the capital of Coast Province, an area that included the city itself, the 10-mile coastal strip of the old Protectorate, certain inland areas, and coastal cities such as Diani, Malindi, Kilifi, Watamu and Lamu.[46] Mombasa formed the political, educational, commercial and transportation hub for the province. But following inter-communal violence that threw Kenya into turmoil in 2007–2008, a process of constitutional reform culminated in the drafting of a new constitution in 2010, and its adoption in 2013.[47] The core of the new constitution was the devolution of authority from national to local level. Under Devolution, the provincial level of government was abolished and 47 counties replaced the eight former provinces. Mombasa city became Mombasa County, an area that covers the urban zone itself and its peri-urban areas, with the former city limits of Mombasa expanding slightly to become the new county boundary. Apart from shrinking the geographical reach of officials in Mombasa, the new arrangement merged the mayoral with the provincial administration, turning the Mayor of Mombasa into the Governor of Mombasa County – Kenya's only fully urban county, and its smallest by area (though one of its most developed and heavily populated).[48]

Devolution was intended to address several problems that had emerged since independence, and which many Kenyans believed had contributed to the violence of 2007–2008. These included decision-making remote from local communities and realities; perceived neglect and marginalisation of some areas (including Mombasa) and minority populations; centralisation of resources at the national level, leaving cities and provinces without the means to address infrastructure shortfalls such as dilapidated hospitals and roads; and victimisation based on political affiliation: 'If an area did not support the government of the time, [it] did not receive any attention [and] had limited resources.'[49]

In response, the 2010 constitution placed administrative functions under a county executive council or public service board, with the county headed by an elected governor and responsive to a county assembly including both elected and appointed members. A county commissioner was responsible for day-to-day administration of services. The constitution also mandated sharing of resources between national and county-level governments, with the central government collecting revenues then returning 15 per cent of revenue to counties to meet their expenses.[50] As we will see, in the case of the highly-lucrative Port of Mombasa and the SGR, both of which generate significant funds for the national government, this allocation leaves many in Mombasa dissatisfied.[51]

Conflict on the Coast

Far from resolving intra-regional and inter-ethnic tensions, however, Devolution coincided with a spike of violence driven by religious, ethnic and regional differences founded in the distinct history of the coastal region.[52] Tensions had already been exacerbated by the US-led global war on terrorism after 2001 and the conflict in Kenya's northern neighbour, Somalia. After the 1998 bombing of US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Mombasa became a counterterrorism focus 'after security agents traced the bombers' movements to the metropolis and other coastal spots. Four years later … actionable leads were discovered' following the April 2002 bombing of a Jewish-owned hotel at Kikambala, 34 kilometres up the coast road from Mombasa (which killed 13 and injured 80) and the attempted shoot-down of an Israeli-chartered airliner, using surface-to-air missiles, as it took off from Mombasa's Moi Airport.[53]

Crackdown and backlash

The 2002 attack – with its sharply negative impact on Mombasa's important tourism industry – prompted a harsh crackdown by police and security services, which in turn led to a public backlash and the emergence of 'no-go areas', with alienated communities and individuals willing to offer sanctuary to armed actors in some parts of the city. By the time of the Devolution debate in 2010–2013, the anti-terror campaign (directed from Nairobi and conducted by national agencies) had prompted human rights groups to accuse the

central government of extra-judicial 'gangland-style' killings of suspected extremists.[54] Radical clerics, inhabitants of informal settlements and majority-Muslim constituencies such as Majengo and Kisauni (areas that, rightly or wrongly, had developed a reputation for extremist presence) or Changamwe (the constituency, just east of Moi Airport and close to Mombasa's main oil refinery, from which the missiles were launched during the 2002 airliner attack) saw heavy-handed security.[55] Somalis and Kenyans of Somali descent were targeted after the surge in terrorism that followed Kenya's intervention in Somalia, which began in mid-October 2011.[56] A string of grenade attacks, attempting bombings, weapon-smuggling incidents and other terrorism struck Mombasa in 2011–2014, leading to police and intelligence operations in Mombasa and other coastal towns.[57]

These operations targeted radical clerics, transnational jihadists including British citizen Samantha Lewthwaite (linked to the 2005 London bombing and the 2013 Nairobi Westgate Mall attack) whose last-known location was a flat in Kisauni's Bakarani Estate, and returnees from the war in Somalia.[58] Mosques such as Masjid Musa in the Mombasa Island neighbourhood of Majengo, linked to slain extremist cleric Aboud Rogo, saw police sweeps, mass arrests and large-scale protests during this period, including a major raid in November 2014 in which 250 young men were arrested.[59] A month later, Kenyan police allegedly admitted to conducting a campaign of up to 500 extra-judicial killings in and around Mombasa, according to Al-Jazeera.[60] They claimed to have received British and Israeli assistance under a program directed at the highest level from Nairobi; the Kenyan government disputes this account and has denied the claims.[61]

Mombasa Republican Council

During the same time frame, a revival of coastal separatist sentiment led to another surge of violence in Mombasa.[62] Local separatists, loosely organised under the umbrella of the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) and including Muslim and Christian groups, engaged in street violence and alleged acts of terrorism, prompting another harsh government crackdown.[63]

MRC leaders wrote to the British government, the United Nations and others, claiming distinct legal rights due to the coast's former Protectorate status, and alleging these had been betrayed during Kenya's independence process in the 1960s.[64] The group was outlawed; several leaders were killed and the MRC's head, Omar Hamisi Mwamnuadzi, was arrested in October 2012.[65] In the lead-up to the March 2013 election, 'a series of lethal, if localized attacks raised the possibility of widespread violence' or an MRC boycott; in the event, there were 'savage attacks on police and polling stations the night before the polls' but large-scale unrest did not materialise.[66]

Countering violent extremism

Once the 2013 election was over and Devolution began being implemented, the new government of Mombasa County moved quickly to reverse this history in which local violence was exacerbated by harsh responses driven from Nairobi. The new County Government, under Governor Hassan Joho, instituted a strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism (CVE) through partnership with local communities, seeking to break the vicious cycle of crackdown and backlash that had doomed past efforts. The County worked closely with several civil society groups, including HAKI Africa, a human rights organisation working to improve livelihoods and enhance human rights in Kenya.[67]

Founded at the height of the violence in 2012, and based on Mikindani Road in the heart of old Mombasa, HAKI promotes partnership between state and non-state actors, and 'seeks to agitate for the recognition and empowerment of local communities in Kenya to fully participate in rights and development initiatives, with a view to improving the standards of living amongst all including the poor and marginalized'.[68] HAKI's goals, which fitted well with the objectives of Devolution, made the group a natural partner for Governor Joho's new government, which created a CVE Directorate and began working with HAKI and other civil society organisations to develop a plan that would not only reduce jihadist and separatist violence, but also reconcile alienated and marginalised populations within the city. The British government funded and supported the effort through

local implementing partners.[69] The result was the Mombasa County Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, developed over several months of consultation among stakeholders, and launched in May 2017.[70]

The process was guided by the National Strategy for CVE, developed by the central government through its National Counterterrorism Centre in Nairobi. The new strategy emphasised soft approaches ('encouragement of dialogue, rehabilitation and a multi-sectorial approach to countering violent extremism')[71] rather than hard methods based on arrest, punishment 'or even execution of individuals suspected of involvement in violent extremism'[72] – in effect, a repudiation of the previous approach that had done so much

to alienate local communities. Mombasa's CVE plan was developed through desk reviews of data sources, field research, and discussions linking national and county officials in Mombasa.[73] The action plan built on the nine pillars of the national CVE strategy (psychosocial, education, security, faith-based/ideological, training/capacity building, arts/culture, legal/political and media/online) alongside two additional elements: an economic pillar and a women's pillar. These were developed through a process of dialogue with civil society organisations and the public; they recognised the role of economic inequality in driving youth toward extremism, and the fact that 'women were identified as both victims and perpetrators of violent extremism in Mombasa'.[74]

Learning from Mombasa: Countering Violent Extremism

Mombasa's action plan was one of the earliest county CVE plans to be developed after Devolution, and the process was recognised as being "the most consultative compared to any other process undertaken in other counties."[75] Largely as a result of this consultative approach, the Mombasa action plan has become a model for other counties in Kenya,

and indeed cities across Africa and elsewhere could learn much from Mombasa's experience, both in building the strategy and in continuously monitoring its implementation and engaging with the community to ensure transparency. This has been done through periodic mapping reports and community consultative summits.[76]

Of course, however good a plan might be, planning alone will never be enough to solve overnight a set of complex social, economic and political problems that dates back hundreds of years. This was seen in January 2019, when it emerged that one of the attackers in a deadly terrorist raid on the Dusit D2 Riverside apartment complex in Nairobi had lived for months in an apartment in the Somali-majority neighbourhood of Bondeni, a Mombasa Island district less than a kilometre from the Governor's office and the central police station, indicating the continuing presence of extremist cells in the heart of Mombasa.[77] There is thus no doubt that hard counterterrorism methods, including military and police operations led by national agencies, will remain part of the CVE mix in Mombasa for the foreseeable future. Still, in comparison to the violence that threatened the city in 2011–2014, it seems clear that the new approach, with its themes of consultation, dignity,

access to justice, building resilience, and enhancing cohesion and integration, has contributed to significantly improved public safety in Mombasa.

Upgrading the Urban Fabric

One of the first things one notices, walking or driving around Mombasa, is the blue-and-white colour scheme of virtually every downtown building, contrasting with the beige and pink of Old Town and the world heritage area around Fort Jesus. Locals smile wryly at this newly-uniform paint job, part of an effort by the County Government to foster civic pride and a sense of progress, and thereby prompt broader improvements in Mombasa's cityscape – a sort of urban-fabric version of the crime-reduction strategy known as 'broken windows theory'.[78] Under a policy announced following public consultations

in March 2018, property owners in the city were given only 14 days to implement the colour scheme at their own expense, prompting some complaints.[79] The program has undeniably given Mombasa a much-needed facelift: one youth from Nyali neighbourhood noted, 'We complain but comply, and it's actually not bad. It does give a sense of pride.'[80] This is the most visible aspect of a suite of programs to upgrade Mombasa's urban fabric, intended to help the tourism industry recover, promote economic and social development as part of a national growth strategy, and address the urban marginalisation, inequality and alienation identified as drivers for extremism. Improving informal settlements (slums) is a key aspect of urban upgrading.[81]

Informal settlements

Mombasa's rapid growth and industrialisation, described earlier, inevitably led to the emergence of informal settlements, especially since under colonialism domestic and industrial workers were corralled into un-serviced 'African housing estates' that were excluded from formal urban planning.[82] In many cases, slums offered the only available housing for workers in local industries and factories, or for those offering essential goods and services as part of the *jua kali* (literally, 'hot sun') informal sector, which accounts for fully 95 per cent of Kenya's businesses and entrepreneurs.[83] In addition, because of the historical land tenure issues described earlier, many inhabitants of Mombasa's informal settlements (including areas such as Ziwa la Ng'ombe, Mkomani, Jomvu Kuu and Jomvu Mikanjuni settlements) were considered squatters, with no title to their property, hence no incentive to build or maintain safe and sanitary structures. This problem, of course, is far from unique to Mombasa, but the city's extremely rapid growth has made it particularly acute.

One 2012 study of an informal settlement in Changamwe constituency noted that '60–80 percent of Kenya's urban population lives in slums [with] lack of access to water and sanitation, insecure tenure, lack of adequate housing, poor environmental conditions, and high crime rates. For instance, in Mombasa, about 40 percent of the population lives in slums that [occupy] only 5 percent of the total land area and the growth of Mombasa's slums is

unprecedented; the population living in slums is expected to double within the next 15 years.'[84] To address this problem, Mombasa County in conjunction with the national government, the World Bank, UN Habitat and other partners is implementing an informal settlement improvement program, as part of a national campaign.[85]

The case of Kindunguni

As with CVE, Mombasa's approach has been strongly consultative, even though involuntary resettlement of some residents did turn out to be necessary. One recent effort in Kindunguni, a settlement in the southern mainland constituency of Likoni, involved working closely with a Settlement Executive Committee (SEC) chosen by local residents (and with mandatory participation by women, who make up a significant proportion of householders and small business owners in Kindunguni) in a series of planning and surveying activities to develop a basemap of the settlement and identify structures needing to be redeveloped or moved to ensure safety, access and sanitation.[86]

As a first step, residents were issued 'title deeds for the plots they occupy [as a means to give them secure legal tenure of their property]. This involved the development of a Local Physical Development Plan and surveying of the settlement where 524 beneficiaries owning 505 plots [were] issued with title deeds.'[87] Individuals who were required to relocate in order to open road access to the settlement were given 'appropriate compensation for their affected assets at full replacement cost [along with compensation payments as] livelihood restoration measures while at the same time providing support to the [one affected resident] identified as vulnerable due to chronic illness … Additionally, a Grievance Redress Mechanism was established to receive and resolve grievances arising from titling compensation' and other issues.[88] This reflected national guidelines, following the principles of avoiding involuntary resettlement where feasible, minimising displacement, adequately compensating affected residents, giving enhanced benefits and livelihood restoration, providing assistance to vulnerable groups, and emphasizing gender empowerment and inclusivity.[89]

Learning from Mombasa's Urban Upgrade

Like the CVE plan discussed above, Mombasa's participative approach to urban upgrading is something from which other African cities – facing the same set of challenges – could learn. Giving residents proof of ownership of the land parcels they occupy is a key idea, understanding that with secure tenure, people are more likely to make long-term investments on their land.[90] As the county's plan for Kindunguni notes, 'persons living in the informal settlements with no legal ownership of land parcels they occupy do not invest in permanent housing units for fear of demolitions or evictions [and] few of them take the risk and invest in modern structures … Secured land tenure will cause improvement in settlement infrastructure, increases in housing values/rents, access to credit, and access to infrastructure, ownership and titling. With the tenure of the land secured, it is expected that the beneficiaries in the settlement will invest in better housing for their families.'[91]
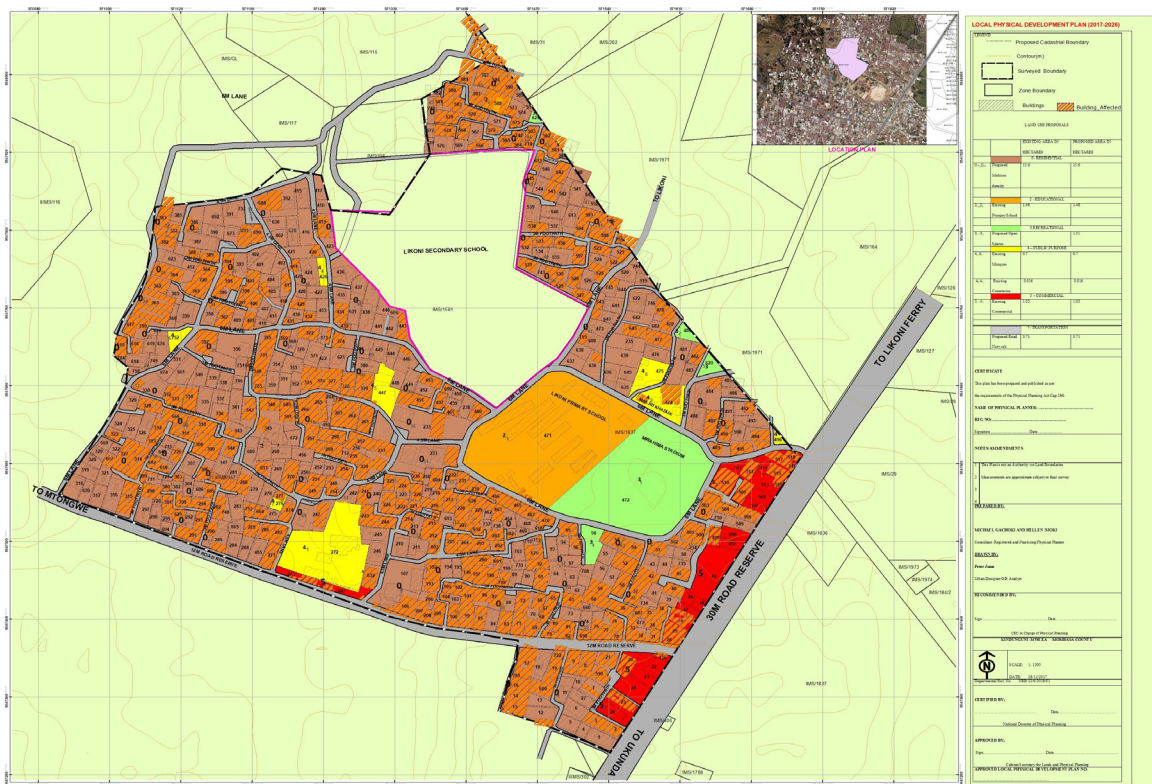
Kindunguni Settlement Upgrading Plan (Source: Mombasa County Government)

Hardware Versus Software

One reason for the government's desire to upgrade Kindunguni is that the district sits next to Likoni Road, linking the Likoni Ferry (the southernmost access point from the mainland to Mombasa Island, across the entrance to Kilindini Harbour) to the south coast. Improving traffic flow and transportation through the city is a critical county goal, and yet another reflection of the city's gateway role. But Mombasa is increasingly matching its longstanding emphasis on hardware – road and bridge infrastructure; the SGR and its associated container terminal, highway and station complex; and the urban upgrading program – with a focus on software. This is true both literally, in the growth of computer-enabled systems and tech businesses across Mombasa, and figuratively in the city's emphasis on business improvement, education, health and human capital.

Digital gateway

Mombasa is not just a physical and commercial gateway – it is the primary East African access point for the fibre-optic cables that enable global high-speed data telecommunications and form the backbone of the internet.[92] Mombasa has four submarine cable landing stations, connecting to four independent fibre-optic networks, with two more planned to be ready for service by 2021. Of the existing cable landing stations, three are in the city itself and one is in the northern urban district of Nyali. Three of the stations – facilities providing electrical power and engineering support to undersea cables and managing the transmission, reception and distribution of their data – are owned by governments or public-private partnerships. The fourth, part of the SEACOM/Tata TGN-Eurasia network, is owned by a private consortium that includes South African, Indian, European and Middle Eastern investors, and was the first to establish a landing station at Mombasa, in July 2009.[93] SEACOM owns the East Africa portion of the consortium's network, with landing stations in South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya and Djibouti.[94] As the first company to establish a cable station in Mombasa, and the first to set up as an internet service provider, SEACOM dominates the Mombasa market for data and internet services, reflecting its multi-year head start over slower, government-owned competitors. The company's cable landing station, on the south-eastern edge of Mombasa Island, gives SEACOM an internet and data transmission Point of Presence in Mombasa, and links to Nairobi, Kampala and Kigali, thereby providing digital connectivity for up-country Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda, much as Mombasa provides road and rail connections to the same places.[95] Unlike the infrastructure that supports those physical connections, however, the benefits to Mombasa of this digital connectivity are immediate and direct.

Less than 200 metres from the SEACOM station is Swahilipot Hub, a technology incubator established in April 2016, which offers a collaborative workspace for Mombasa-based internet startups, artists and social enterprises. The hub 'focuses on inspiring and developing upcoming innovative technology ideas and art through networking, technical training, support, professional mentoring and coaching. It brings together the tech community and artists of all calibers, techpreneurs, entrepreneurs, developers, designers, investors and donors and provides them an opportunity to share knowledge, learn, find mentors and expound on tech ideas that will lead to the development of new technologies in Kenya and globally.'[96] The goal is to 'promote a conducive environment for all community members to learn, share, explore, experiment,
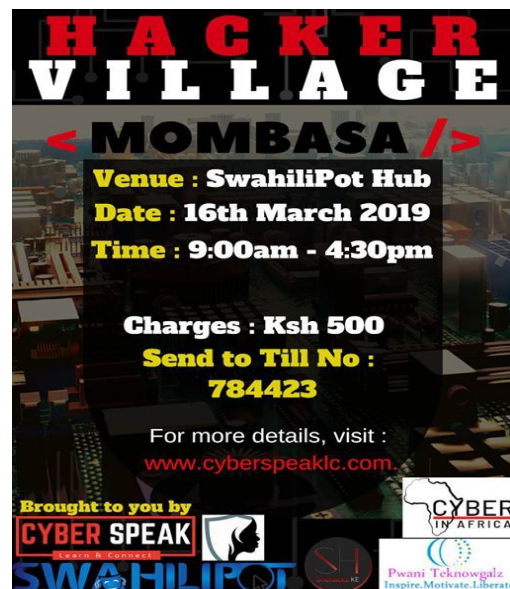
Announcements for events held at Swahilipot Hub, Mombasa

and build sustainable and income-generating solutions, to encourage cooperation and interaction between Entities with similar interests, both within and outside Mombasa (Coastal Region at large) … [and] to advance Arts and Technology initiatives.'[97]

Swahilipot is co-sponsored by SEACOM, the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), the US computer company Cisco, and Kenya's ministry of information, communications and technology. It targets software developers with links to universities in Mombasa, as a way of connecting government, business and educational institutions to improve human capital in the coastal region. NMK donates office space to the hub, SEACOM provides free high-speed internet data while computers, wi-fi routers and other systems are provided by Cisco. Applications developed at Swahilipot are 'designed to help users solve their day to day problems, ranging from linking farmers with produce buyers to monitoring if a patient is taking a prescribed drug to locating a restaurant.'[98] As Mombasa's first tech incubator, Swahilipot gives the city's startups a much-needed space to grow and commercialise their ideas. In this as in other areas, Mombasa is beginning to catch up with Nairobi, which currently houses most of Kenya's technology incubators, serving thousands of developers whose smartphone apps have helped Africans leap-frog a generation of mobile technology, attracting global firms such as Nokia and Samsung, and bringing foreign investors to Kenya.[99]

Mobile banking, lending and trading

This innovation is most visible in Mombasa through mobile money transfer apps, the ridesharing service Uber, and mobile lending apps that help small businesses, unbanked populations and *jua kali* operators access credit and banking services. Safaricom, Kenya's dominant mobile phone provider, is well-known for its M-Pesa mobile money system, which offers money transfer, and for M-Shwari, an M-Pesa derivative that enables savings and loans for a population with limited access to banking.[100] For businesses and their customers in high-crime or poorly serviced areas, M-Pesa avoids the need to travel long distances to

Text Message
Today 12:02

REF: NFD4CK2BYU
Confirmed, dear customer, M–Akiba soft loans now available for 30,000 to 200,000 at 5% interest rate. To apply call or sms 0784001839..

Text Message
Today 00:00

KCB BANK
Dear Customer, KCB softloan is now available to all KCB Mpesa, from
10,000
20,000
50,000
100,000 to 200,000 at 10% interest. Call/Sms
0202000056

Tailored loan offers received via text message on the author's Safaricom mobile phone during fieldwork

bank branches or ATMs, and (perhaps most importantly) to store or carry cash which might make them vulnerable to theft or assault.

Mobile lending services, which track user spending patterns and creditworthiness by monitoring their use of M-Pesa and mobile phone payment history, can precisely tailor loan amounts and repayment terms to customers' capacity, resulting in higher repayment rates and enabling micro-businesses who would otherwise lack access to credit. In this way, software-enabled smart banking systems help alleviate the credit shortages that often represent strong constraints on growth for small and micro-businesses.[101] While lenders who target low-income *jua kali* businesses have been criticised by some researchers (and while some business owners find repayment terms onerous), most local businesspeople interviewed in Mombasa expressed appreciation for the improved ease of access to credit.[102] Safaricom and other companies have now partnered with institutions such as KCB Bank, and M-Akiba (a Kenyan government-issued commercial bond) to offer mobile loans and trading platforms for users at all income levels. Safaricom has created the FX-Pesa trading platform, letting users trade stocks and equities from handheld mobile devices.

Similarly, Uber – widely used in Mombasa – lets travellers move easily about the city by car, Tuk-Tuk (the brightly-painted, three-wheeled
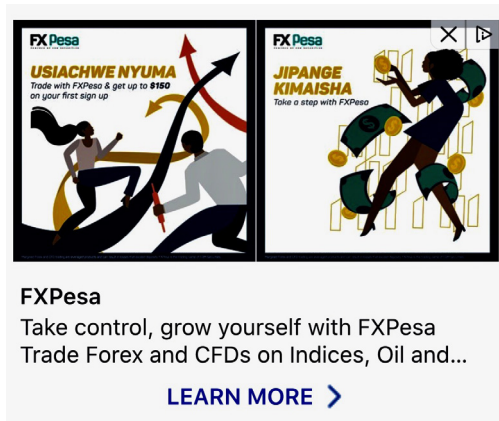
Advertisement for FXPesa sponsored by Safaricom

Tuk-Tuk taxi, part of the Uber network, in rush-hour traffic in downtown Mombasa, 13 June 2019

motorcycle taxis ubiquitous across East Africa) or *boda-boda* (as a pillion passenger on a motorcycle or scooter). Like M-Pesa, Uber offers cashless transactions, reduces the risk of crime, and lets unbanked businesses and customers participate in the economy. It also enables *boda-boda* or Tuk-Tuk drivers to monetise their vehicles, build income and savings, and participate in the formal economy in ways that would not otherwise be open to them.

The Government of Kenya, with the Mombasa County government, has made use of technology to enable an 'e-governance' program that has significantly reduced corruption for citizens interacting with government agencies, and improved ease of access and use of government services; Mombasa has established a similar portal for county-level business services.[103] As the government's 'Vision 2030' policy proudly affirms, 'By leveraging technology, government has revolutionized how citizens access its services, making it much easier to bring services closer to the people, cutting delivery time and securing revenues paid for such services. As a gateway to all government services, the eCitizen portal has seen the progressive addition of different agencies enabling Kenyans and foreign nationals to access services digitally. There are 197 different public services offered under the eCitizen portal and these include passport applications, visa applications, driving license renewals, vehicle registration, business registration, company searches and applications for certificates of good conduct.'[104]

Learning from Mombasa's Digital Explosion

Kenya in general, and Mombasa in particular, has become a model for the impact of digital connectivity and mobile technology on governance, business and social cohesion. The presence of SEACOM and others has given Mombasa the opportunity to exploit faster, cheaper and better connectivity than other parts of east and central Africa. Although Nairobi dominates the tech hub and software development space at present, Mombasa is catching up. The public-private partnership model, inherent in Swahilipot Hub and in the broader growth of mobile money transfer, savings, lending and equities trading platforms, and ride-hailing apps such as Uber, has enabled informal-sector businesses and individuals to access a modern national and global economy. In so doing Mombasa has leap-frogged a generation of technology, and its e-governance and e-business approaches offer significant lessons for cities in Africa, and in other countries.

Geopolitics on Rails

Not all infrastructure investments in Mombasa benefit businesses and local people, and the insider's view often differs sharply from that of outsiders. By far the best illustration of this is the Chinese-funded Standard-Gauge Railway, the 21st century's version of the Uganda Railway that put Mombasa on the imperial map more than a century ago.

By the early 2000s, Kenya's original British-built railway was in deep disrepair, with dilapidated rolling stock, unsafe and poorly maintained tracks, unsanitary stations and a reputation for massive delays, with trains sometimes departing eight to 12 hours late and taking a full day to cover a distance that should take five hours at most.[105] No new railway track had been laid in Kenya since the completion of the original narrow-gauge Mombasa–Kampala line in 1901.[106] The railway was rapidly losing money, as businesses shifted from rail to road transport to ship goods from Mombasa to Nairobi and beyond. Massive 18-wheel semi-trailer cargo trucks clogged the Mombasa–Nairobi highway, generating traffic jams and damaging the road surface. The railway's failure became a development bottleneck, limiting growth at the Port of Mombasa, where cargo volumes had been increasing since the 1980s: by 2013, the year when Devolution came into effect, the port was handling 20 million tonnes of cargo per year, compared to 7 million in the 1980s, well above the 3.5 million tonnes handled in the rival port of Dar es Salaam.[107] Conversely, the increasing demand for inland cargo distribution overwhelmed the railway, despite periodic attempts to fix the problem through state investment.

In 2014 the central government in Nairobi signed a memorandum of understanding with China, under which the Export-Import Bank of China loaned Kenya USD3.24 billion, to finance 90 per cent of the construction cost for a standard-gauge railway connecting Mombasa to Nairobi and running parallel to the old railway. Kenya agreed to finance the remaining 10 per cent, or USD360 million, for a total project cost of USD3.6 billion.[108] China Road and Bridge Corporation was engaged as prime contractor to construct the railway, which became the largest infrastructure project undertaken anywhere in Kenya since independence. The Chinese contractor hired 25 000 Kenyans to build the railway, with construction commencing in 2016 and completed on 31 May 2017. The first passenger trains began running in June 2017, sharing the route with freight services from the Port of Mombasa after January 2018. The system is dramatically more efficient than its predecessor: clean, fast and reliable, with two trains to Nairobi each day, hundreds of thousands of passengers have ridden the railway, while the new freight service has relieved the trans-modal bottleneck that had developed at the Port of Mombasa, enabling a massive improvement in the city's cargo throughput capacity.

Despite concerns about China's pattern of so-called 'debt-trap diplomacy', worries about Kenya's sovereignty being compromised by such a large and heavily-leveraged project, and complaints about the failure of the Chinese contractor to replace expatriate senior management and technical personnel with Kenyans as required in the original agreement, the general outsider perspective on the SGR has been hugely positive.[109] Concerns about China's growing geopolitical influence in Africa, often expressed by American commentators, ring extraordinarily hollow given how little development assistance western countries were willing to offer Kenya until China showed an interest: on the surface, at least, suggesting an echo of Britain's 'dog-in-the-manger' policy before 1884, and triggering commentary about a 'new scramble for Africa'.[110] For Kenya, needing foreign capital (and, especially, infrastructure investment) to unlock the country's development potential, accepting help from China absolutely makes sense.

Combined with expanded container-handling and cranage capacity at the Port of Mombasa, the SGR has enabled growth at Mombasa's harbour and container terminals (some of the city's largest employers), relieved overcrowding on the Mombasa–Nairobi highway, and generated significant additional revenue for Kenya as a result of increased customs-and-excise payments. The proposed continuation of the railway from Nairobi to Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania and Burundi

under the next phase of the East African Railways Master Plan will further expand Mombasa's reach as a gateway for central Africa, bringing a market of more than 550 million people within the city's distribution network. All this seems like unequivocally good news.

But the view from Mombasa is very different. Mombasa's economy, pre-SGR, relied heavily on storage, warehousing and trucking companies – dozens of local firms, mostly small and medium enterprises, who ran the warehouses and operated the semi-trailers and container trucks that had stepped in to replace the failing railway in the late 1990s and early 2000s. One estimate suggests that roughly 43 per cent of the city's economy, prior to the SGR, relied on transport and logistics.[111] The SGR put many trucking and warehousing companies out of business, while others moved to Nairobi. Youth unemployment (for individuals under 35) averages 21 per cent across Kenya as a whole, according to local officials; in Mombasa the rate is now 44 per cent, including a 30–50 per cent increase directly attributable to the SGR.[112] Absorbing these newly-unemployed young people into other lines of work – and finding employment and support for their families – is a key priority for the county government, which is focusing on the city's new Special Economic Zone, the Japanese-funded port facility (which employs 8 000 people), light manufacturing, and value-added processing in industries such as apparel, fisheries, agriculture, and automobiles to make up the difference.[113] But this is easier said than done, especially since a great deal of retraining and vocational and technical education is required, and now that construction is complete, the SGR can absorb only a tiny fraction of the workforce employed to build it. Hence, in employment terms – and given the loss of economic activity occasioned by the closure of so many local firms – the SGR has been a net negative for Mombasa.

It might seem that increased throughput at the port, and growth in landing and bunkerage fees and customs-and-excise income, might make up for this. But as Kenya's only port, Mombasa is a national asset and administered by the Kenya Ports Authority directly from Nairobi, with revenue going straight to the capital and only a small proportion returning to Mombasa.[114] Unlike other harbour cities in Africa, which keep an agreed portion of the revenue they generate, Mombasa is not permitted to do so. And then there is the matter of customs clearance, which takes place in Nairobi – formally considered the point of entry for foreign shipping containers – rather than Mombasa.

The impact on local Mombasa businesses is dire. As the CFO of a local chain of coffee shops (which, tellingly, was until recently a transport and warehousing company but was forced to lay off most of its staff and convert to the café business as a result of the SGR) points out, beverages or foodstuffs imported through the port of Mombasa can't be accessed by the Mombasa-based businesses who paid for them until first being shipped to Nairobi and clearing customs there.[115] They must then be shipped back at the company's expense to Mombasa, adding an estimated 17.5 per cent onto the cost of food and beverages, which – for this café chain, as for most restaurants and tourist businesses in the coastal region – are largely imported. The manager of a restaurant and hotel near the northern coastal town of Malindi confirms that the SGR has brought increased costs, shipping delays, and loss or spoilage issues for many tourism businesses on the coast.[116] Given the history of coastal versus inland rivalry, and the perception (ill-founded or not) of corruption on the part of government officials, this understandably generates resentment on the coast, especially when the SGR's benefits accrue mostly to Nairobi.

Gateway to the Future?

Despite these tensions, as Mombasa looks to the future, county officials, business people and local communities seem upbeat about the city, its people and its gateway role. At the national level, the Kenyan Government's 'Vision 2030' concept, launched in 2008, aims to transform Kenya into a 'newly-industrializing, middle-income country providing a high quality of life to all its citizens by 2030 in a clean and secure environment'.[117] The government's recently-announced 'Big 4 Agenda' – an accelerated 5-year development plan to fast-track Vision 2030 – comprises four

pillars: Manufacturing, Food Security, Universal Public Health, and Affordable Housing. The plan includes an impressively long list of highly specific goals, covering everything from industry, housing, health, food security, ease of doing business, manufacturing, agricultural-processing and foreign direct investment, to farmers' income, home ownership and construction. Enablers identified in the plan include macro-economic stability, completing major infrastructure projects, investing in security to support a 24-hour economy, fighting corruption and increasing accountability, leveraging technology and innovation to improve government services, ensuring competitive cost of energy and equipping youth with vocational skills.[118]

It's hard to dispute that these are the right goals – the issue for Kenya is whether such extraordinarily aspirational objectives are achievable, across a nation with such diverse levels of regional development and such rapid population growth, within the mere five years envisaged in the government's Big 4 plan. Vision 2030 – issued within a few months of the government's election in 2008 – also seems more a political document, designed to offer something to everyone as a way of unifying the country after the 2007–2008 violence, than a serious planning tool. Implementation delays have also undermined confidence in the central government's plan, with one commentator arguing in 2016 that 'Kenya's Vision 2030 has lost its flavour. I wonder if there are any Kenyans in high places and in the streets, who still get excited by sentences containing the words Vision 2030. Our media stopped telling us anything that's happening around Vision 2030 and we (tech bloggers) also got tired of waiting for key projects that were meant to be the technological foundation for Vision 2030 … Mombasa County seems to have developed cold feet too hence came up with its own vision, Mombasa Vision 2035.'[119]

For Mombasa's leaders, living in a city that expects to have 2.3 million people by 2035 (adding roughly one million residents, or slightly less than the city's entire current population, in just the next 16 years), and constrained by terrain and county boundaries to an area of only 134 square kilometres, the clear practical needs are for urban

renewal and redevelopment. The phenomenal projected growth in the city's population (along with its already high traffic congestion and unemployment) means that development planners in the Mombasa County government are focused on meeting the demand for almost 400 000 new housing units, and the needs of a growing, dynamic gateway city. Increased tourism – largely from non-traditional sources such as Ethiopia, Russia, Turkey and Eastern Europe – and the growth of mining in neighbouring Kwale County, which relies on Mombasa for most support services and accommodation, are simultaneously putting pressure on the city's urban system while opening new growth opportunities.[120]

With its more practical orientation, the county government's vision of the future is focused on housing, transportation, infrastructure, parks and recreation, and urban design. That said, the county's integrated strategic urban development plan, 'Mombasa Vision 2035', can still sound at least as ambitious and aspirational as the national-level goals outlined in Vision 2030.[121] Its objectives include achieving balanced urban growth, turning Mombasa into a world-class commercial hub, creating well-distributed employment opportunities, quality living for all residents, seamless connectivity through transport upgrades, infrastructure excellence, a well-nurtured environment including an extensive green network, and conserving the city's natural and built heritage. An impressive animated video fly-through of the city of 2035, developed by Nairobi design studio Vertex Studio, depicts a Mombasa international stadium in the northern coastal district of Mtwapa, planned to seat 60 000 spectators, a passenger ferry system, complementing a renewed Nyali Bridge connecting Mombasa Island to the southern mainland, an upgraded Likoni Ferry in the south, proposed new Tudor Creek ferries and water buses from the island to other parts of the county; a proposed new Likoni Bridge over Kilindini Harbour, constructed with sufficient elevation for major ships to pass under it, and the construction of a series of new urban zones including an Eco City, Knowledge City, Petro City, New Jomvu City and a Special Economic Zone, linked by a ring road and public transport system.[122]
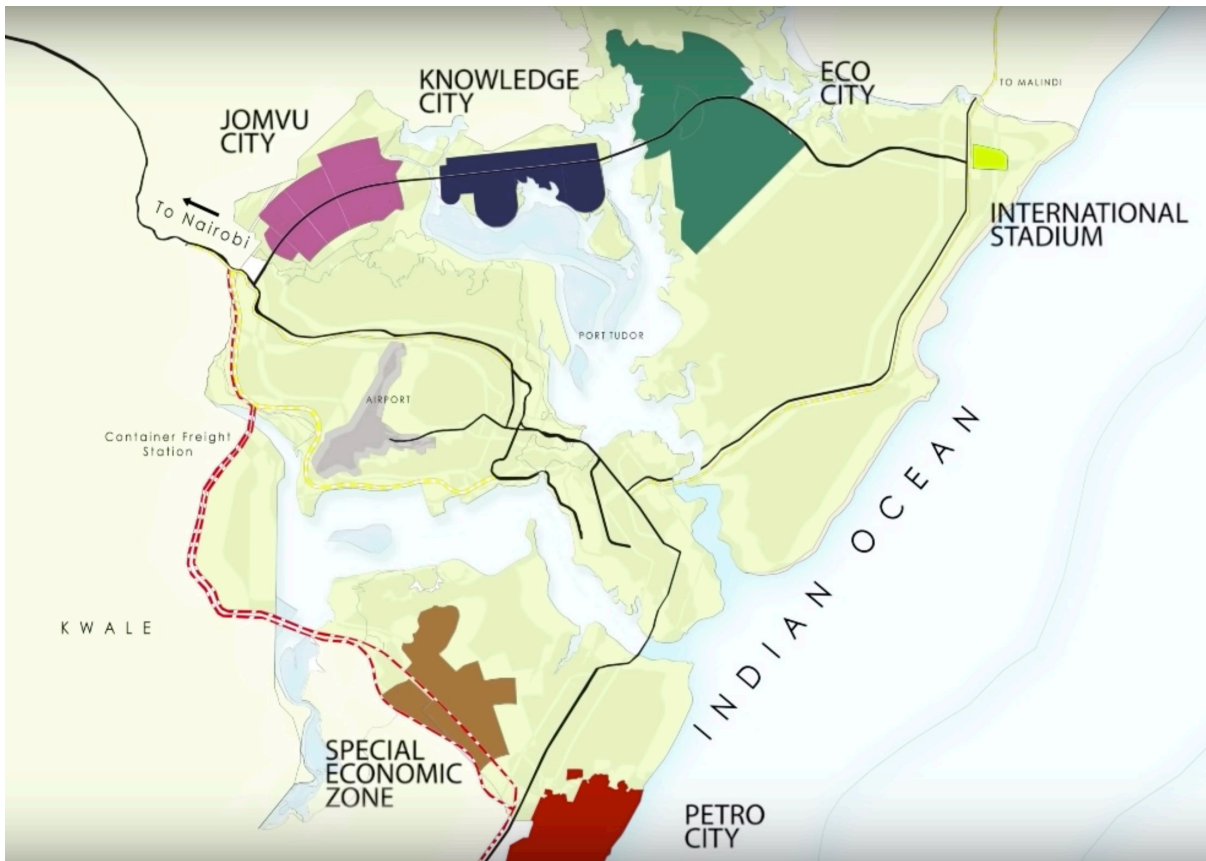
Screenshot from Vertex Studios Mombasa Vision 2035 animation

Although it can seem similarly aspirational on the surface, the Mombasa county plan is significantly more practical than the national-level plan, reflecting the high degree of public consultation that preceded it. Governor Joho's team conducted more than three years of public consultation and community discussions as they developed the city master plan, created new financial mechanisms and civil service structures to support it, and rolled it out only after first focusing on pressing issues identified as priorities by the community, including health services, closure of a dangerous landfill dump, and upgrading of informal settlements.[123] The county government created a department of Lands, Planning and Housing to focus on urban upgrading, redevelopment and land tenure issues.[124] The Mombasa team then worked closely with the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to translate the broad vision of Mombasa 2035 into a more practicable, fully-funded master plan, the Mombasa Gate City Master Plan.[125] This plan integrates all existing infrastructure plans within Mombasa, and included urban transport, railways, the airport, power and water supply, sewage, telecommunications and solid waste management. A lengthy consultative and stakeholder engagement process during 2016–2017 involved public meetings in every affected constituency, as well as a county-wide consultation process.[126] Working groups were set up to link funding agencies with the government and key stakeholders in each of the key categories. This consultative approach resulted in a series of concrete development projects, aligned with the broader Mombasa 2035 vision; the county, with assistance from JICA, has begun working through these projects, with funding from a combination of local and international investors and official development assistance from the Japanese government.

Learning from Mombasa's Planning Approach

On the surface, Mombasa's Vision 2035 and Gate City Master Plans can seem just as aspirational and potentially unrealistic as similar plans produced at the national level in Nairobi. But the way that Mombasa County has pursued these plans, and is now executing them, offers positive lessons to other cities. A strongly consultative, engaged and transparent process has ensured public and stakeholder participation in the planning process, and has ensured the plans align with community priorities. Likewise, Governor Joho focused on resolving immediate, pressing everyday concerns for Mombasa's residents before launching the plan (which might otherwise have seemed naively detached from reality). Cooperating with multiple partners on these projects – including the British, Japanese and Chinese governments, private investors, multinational corporations and international institutions such as the UN and World Bank – has also ensured that Mombasa's unique vision has not been derailed by any single partner's priorities, allowing the city and county to maintain significant autonomy.

Conclusion

Mombasa will remain a gateway to Africa into the future, as it has been throughout its history, and as the SGR extends its reach further inland, the county pursues its Gate City master plan, and the harbour and container terminals continue to grow, the city will continue to be a trading and transport hub and a vibrant cultural and commercial centre in a changing Africa. As this history indicates, the city's gateway role has often been in tension with the interests of Mombasa itself, and of its citizens.

Mombasa has been an important trading hub for well over a thousand years, connecting inland Africa with global sea-borne trade. Under the Portuguese empire, the creation of Fort Jesus helped transform the surrounding settlement on Mombasa Island into the hub of what became a major city. The arrival of the Omani Arabs, and the Sultanate of Zanzibar, tied the city into a global trading network, in support of which Swahili traders ranged far inland for slaves, gold, ivory and up-country commodities, which they sold onward in exchange for a huge variety of goods. The slave trade attracted negative attention from the British in the early 19th century, but after the short-lived (and unauthorised) protectorate of 1824–1826, Britain's ongoing anti-slavery blockade in the Indian Ocean helped ensure a high degree of autonomy for Mombasa, despite the city technically falling under the sovereignty of the Sultan in Zanzibar. Later in the century, Britain's 'dog-in-the-manger' attitude to East Africa meant that it was only when Germany showed an interest in the region, after 1884, that London became sufficiently motivated to colonise Kenya during the late-1890s 'Scramble for Africa'.

The Uganda Railway, built in 1896–1901, opened up Kenya to development and growth, connected Mombasa on the coast with the Great Lakes region, helped create Nairobi, transformed Mombasa into a rail and shipping hub, and spurred urban growth, but at the same time it imposed severe stresses on the city's water supply, along with growing pains that affected transport, sanitation and housing. Development also brought a power shift – influence flowed from coastal to inland regions, from Mombasa to Nairobi, and from coastal Swahili populations to up-country population groups. These groups, who spearheaded the push for independence from Britain and led the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s, have dominated Kenya since Independence in 1963, contributing to regional tensions that still affect Mombasa today.

As the city has grown, the balance between hardware – transport, infrastructure, the urban fabric – and software, including health, education and, more recently, digital telecommunications and computing, has become a key issue. Coastal and religious tensions, founded in the unique historical, religious and ethnic character of the

coastal region, led groups of separatists and jihadist cells in Mombasa to engage in violence and terrorism in the early 21st century, prompting harsh government crackdowns, spearheaded by national agencies headquartered in Nairobi, which only exacerbated the problem. Since Devolution, under Kenya's 2010 Constitution, the re-organised County Government of Mombasa has emphasised inclusive, locally-consultative means to prevent and counter violent extremism, with considerable (though not total) success. The same consultative approach infuses the city's approach to urban upgrading, infrastructure development, and the improvement of economic opportunities as it seeks to overcome the negative legacies of colonialism while building on the benefits of its gateway role.

At the same time, insider–outsider, and coastal–inland tensions still remain – notably in the uneven (and in many ways quite negative) impact of the Chinese-funded Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) built in 2016–2018 to replace the collapsing British-built Mombasa to Nairobi railroad. Highly aspirational plans for Mombasa's growth out to 2035 can seem quite unrealistic in this context, but the city's track record since devolution, of consultative engagement, public consultation and practical, realistic approaches to funding and implementing of projects, suggests that Mombasa will offer many lessons for other African cities in the future, even as its history offers both positive and negative insights about what it means to be a Gateway to Africa.

Endnotes

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