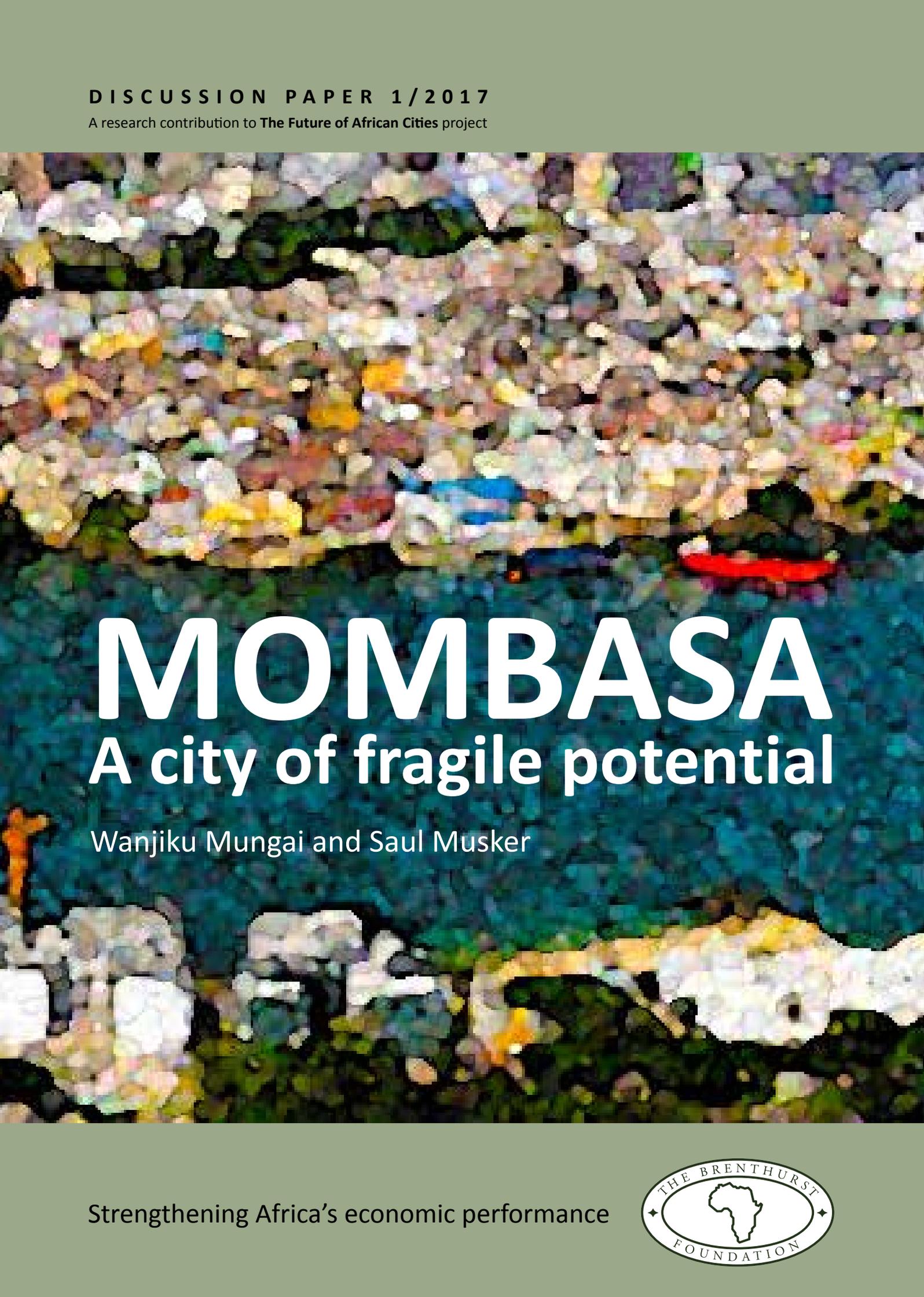


DISCUSSION PAPER 1/2017

A research contribution to The Future of African Cities project



# MOMBASA

## A city of fragile potential

Wanjiku Mungai and Saul Musker

Strengthening Africa's economic performance



# MOMBASA

## A city of fragile potential



### Contents

Executive summary.. . . . .	3
Introduction . . . . .	4
Growing pains.. . . . .	6
Building a city for the future . . . . .	11
Invisible walls – Mombasa’s potential in peril? . . . . .	13
Possibilities for progress.. . . . .	15
Conclusion . . . . .	16
Endnotes . . . . .	18
Bibliography . . . . .	18

### About the Authors

**Wanjiku Mungai** and **Saul Musker** are Machel Mandela Fellows at The Brenthurst Foundation. A recent graduate of Harvard University, Mungai is a writer and filmmaker based in Nairobi, Kenya. Musker is a 2017 recipient of the Rhodes Scholarship and will read for a Masters in Global Governance and Diplomacy at Oxford.

Published in March 2017 by The Brenthurst Foundation

E Oppenheimer & Son (Pty) Ltd  
PO Box 61631, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa  
Tel +27-(0)11 274-2096 · Fax +27-(0)11 274-2097  
[www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org](http://www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org)

All rights reserved. The material in this publication may not be reproduced, stored, or transmitted without the prior permission of the publisher. Short extracts may be quoted, provided the source is fully acknowledged.

Layout and design by Sheaf Publishing, Benoni.

## Executive summary

Mombasa has played a crucial role in the history of Kenya for centuries, and the future of Kenya's Coast Province undoubtedly hinges on its fate. Today, the city faces a range of imposing challenges, some of them similar to those encountered by many mid-sized, fast-growing African cities – for example, an infrastructure system that is insufficient to meet the demands of a burgeoning population, an unskilled and uneducated workforce and high levels of youth unemployment – and others, like the threat of local extremist groups and drug-related violence, which are unique to its context. Compounding all of these challenges are the ever-present social tensions which threaten to destabilise the city and disrupt

its development agenda, including divisions between the Black African community and the wealthier Asian and Arab communities; between Christians, Muslims and indigenous traditions; between people of inland origin (known as *wa bara* in Kiswahili) and those of the coast; and, interacting with and transcending all of these, between the rich and the poor. Nevertheless, while Mombasa's worries are profound, they are not insurmountable. Indeed, the city has the potential to drive Kenya's economic growth and to cement itself as a haven of stability. This discussion paper analyses the key obstacles that Mombasa must overcome to do so, and suggests a pragmatic way forward for local leaders.

## Introduction

A dance takes place at the Likoni Ferry that has been etched into the daily tale of Mombasa since the ferry began operations in 1937. Every few minutes, one of the large boats traversing the city's deep-water inlet known as the Kilindini Harbor picks up people and vehicles on one side to carry them across to the other. Its motor hums as it sends ripples across the calm waters. During the day, the island of Mombasa on Kenya's southern coast experiences an upsurge in its population as people from nearby Kwale and Kilifi counties make the commute across to their places of work and commerce. In the evening, as the sun sets on the emptying city, they return home.

The future of Kenya's Coast Province undoubtedly hinges on the fate of the city of Mombasa

The name 'Mombasa' has various possible associations. Mombasa County is one of the 47 administrative areas into which Kenya has been divided since the devolution of government, which began in 2010. It spans four smaller divisions: Changamwe, the site of the oil refinery that services a significant portion of East Africa, where imported crude oil is processed before it is transported inland via pipeline or oil tanker trucks; Likoni, the area around the harbour, where the ferry departs; Kisauni, connected to Mombasa by the Nyali bridge; and Mombasa Island itself. Mombasa Island is linked to mainland Kenya at three different points via the Likoni Ferry, the Nyali Bridge and the Makupa Causeway. Mombasa city, which takes up most of the island, is the second-largest city in Kenya, home to an international airport and a bustling commercial and administrative center. As a result, the future of Kenya's Coast Province undoubtedly hinges on the fate of the city.

Mombasa has played a crucial role in the history of Kenya as a whole. Nairobi, the country's contemporary political and economic capital, was only established in 1899 with the construction of a railway leading inland from the coast. The port town

of Mombasa, on the other hand, was already buzzing with activity in the 12th century, while most of mainland Kenya remained closed-off to the rest of the world. Traders from the Arab subcontinent were swept by seasonal winds to the eastern coast of Africa, landing on the shores of the Indian Ocean. Mombasa became a meeting point for peoples of diverse origins, including Arab traders, Portuguese explorers, and English missionaries. It also grew into a major trading post, most notoriously as a center of the coast's thriving slave trade. Slavery shaped the contours of the city; the sale of slaves represented a major source of its revenue and slaves who were not exported to North Africa or the Middle East remained in the region and were made to work on spice plantations.

The growing town of Mombasa assumed an almost schizophrenic quality as it combined influences from all its various communities. This quality is reflected most starkly in the birth of the Swahili language, defined either as a Bantu language with heavy Arabic influence or as an amalgam of both, depending on whom you ask. Wealthy merchants and traders lived alongside poor slaves (and later freedmen) from the coast and mainland, and even from further afar in Southern Africa. Islam and Christianity coexisted with varied traditional African faith systems. The cosmopolitan nature of the city is visible today in its eclectic architecture, a blend of styles from Africa, Western Europe and the Middle East.

The cosmopolitan nature of the city is visible today in its eclectic architecture, a blend of styles from Africa, Western Europe and the Middle East

By the time the British Imperial Company landed in Mombasa in the 1800s, Mombasa town had passed intermittently through the hands of the Omani Arabs and the Portuguese and had a long

**Figure 1: Likoni Ferry**



**Figure 2: Mombasa Gate City masterplan**



history in its own right. Control was officially relinquished to the British in 1887, and the city became the capital of the British East Africa Protectorate. The arrival of the British had significant consequences for the country as a whole, and Mombasa did not escape these. With British colonial rule came the construction of the Uganda Railway with Mombasa as its sea terminal, which opened up inland Kenya for exploration, exploitation and subjugation, and had the indirect effect of reviving the port city. Once the railway was completed, settlers advanced rapidly into the mainland, occupying large swathes of land and claiming it for themselves while systematically

disregarding the land rights of Africans who had lived in the area for centuries. The scars of this history remain etched into Mombasa's landscape, although the city has continued to change and evolve at a rapid pace over the last century.

Today, during holiday periods in Kenya, swathes of people from the capital Nairobi and elsewhere pile into buses, cars and planes heading for Mombasa. They come in search of the warmth and happiness with which the coastal city has long been associated, famously captured by Disney's *Lion King* in the refrain *Hakuna Matata* – 'No worries, for the rest of your days'.

## Growing pains

And yet the city is not without worries, some of them profound. Most immediately, an exploding population presents serious challenges to urban planning and to the creation of a safe and well-functioning city. In the 2009 national census the Mombasa population was found to be approximately one million, with 939 370 people – nearly half of whom are below the age of 30 – spread over a land mass of 229.6 square kilometres. This indicates a population growth rate of around 40 per cent in the last decade. Over and above this, a significant number of people commute to work in the city from nearby towns such as Mariakani. The city's transport and other infrastructure is struggling to cope with the burden of a growing population, or with the influx of increasing crowds of workers each day. The population is expected to continue to grow rapidly, as economic growth spurs migrants from more rural parts of the country to relocate to Mombasa in search of work. The major industries that attract labourers from other counties include manufacturing, the service and processing industries, the Port of Mombasa and container freight terminals and the Kenya Ferry Service. Mombasa's most highly populated areas are clustered around the existing road network and other transport infrastructure such as the Moi International Airport. Settlements such as Chidi are informal, unplanned and under-resourced, while more spacious and better-developed neighbourhoods serve tourists and the wealthy. Like many similar cities in sub-Saharan Africa, Mombasa is characterised

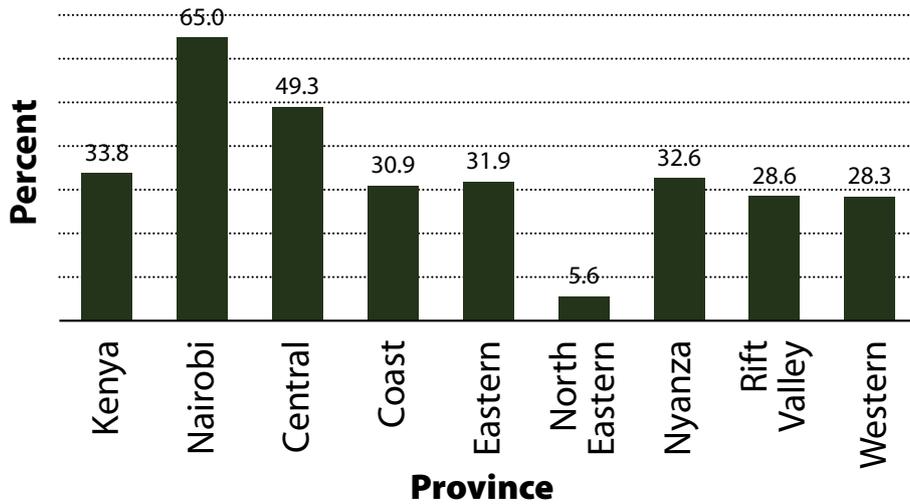
by acute inequality, with areas of extreme poverty juxtaposed against small pockets of wealth.

At 44 per cent, the rate of youth unemployment in Mombasa is more than double the national average, representing a real risk both to political stability and to economic growth. A particular obstacle to job creation is the low level of education of the city's population. Considering income and educational attainment, the picture is grim across the board.

The city's transport and other infrastructure is struggling to cope with the burden of a growing population, or with the influx of increasing crowds of workers each day

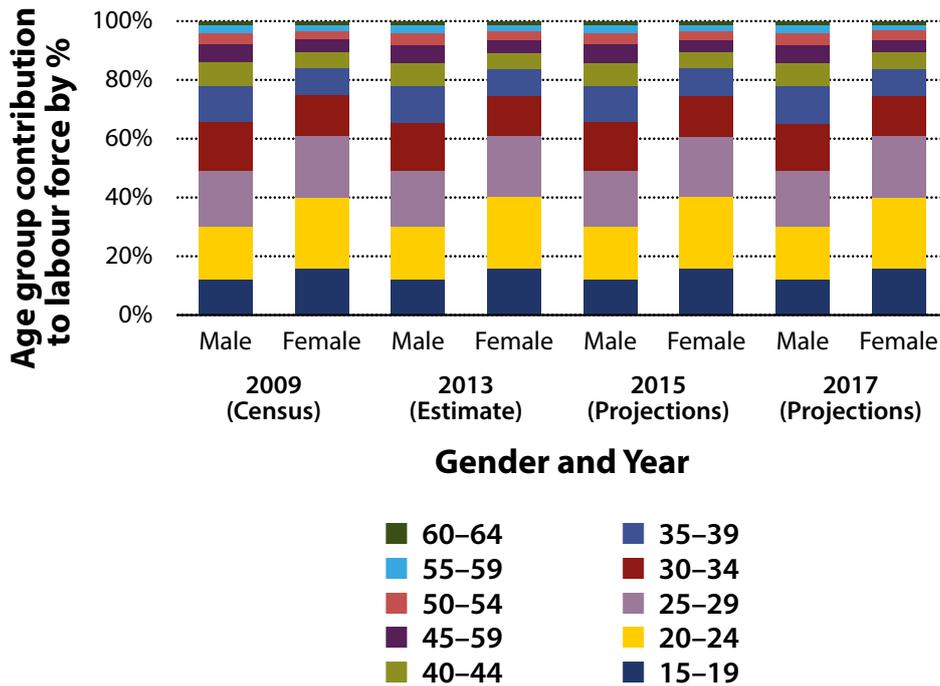
Only 6 per cent of Mombasa's adult population has a university education, while just 30.9 per cent has a level of education at secondary school or higher. As Figure 1 shows, the Coastal Province (of which Mombasa County is the largest constituent part) lags behind many other provinces, especially Nairobi, on these indicators. Moreover, 56 per cent of the population earns less than Kshs25 000 a month (\$250), and only 16 per cent of the population earns over Kshs50 000 (\$500) a month. Poverty is rife in the county, with 40 per cent of the population

Figure 3: Proportion of population with secondary level of education or higher, by province (2009)



Source: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2009)

Figure 4: Mombasa County age group contribution to labour force by gender and year



Source: GoK (2010) – digitised by author

experiencing frequent food shortages. This both contributes to and is exacerbated by significant levels of crime and drug use and a high HIV infection rate.<sup>1</sup> A significant proportion of the population earns an income from the informal sector, but as the writers of one paper explain:<sup>2</sup>

All those who engage in informal sector activities face problems, including lack of access to credit; cumbersome and bureaucratic licensing requirements; ‘taxation’ in the form of bribes demanded by the police and council *askaris* from those operating without licences or in nonpermitted locations, especially the central business district; regulatory restrictions; and lack of appropriate sites and premises.

In addition to the severe infrastructure and economic challenges associated with a sharp demographic spike, Mombasa faces several security threats that, if not properly managed, could jeopardise both its citizens’ safety and its reputation as a destination for tourism and investment.

The Likoni attacks of 2014 placed Mombasa on the map as a site of terrorist activity. Balaclava-clad Islamic extremists opened fire at worshippers attending a church service in the Likoni constituency of Mombasa County in March of that year, killing six and wounding many more. It took over two years for the UK government’s travel advisory against visiting Mombasa, released in the wake of the attacks, to be removed. In the interim, numbers dropped from ‘a high of 280 000 British tourists annually to fewer than 60 000 British tourists, from 80% of the total market to less than 10%’, according to Mohammed Hersi, a hotel executive. Convincing wary tourists to return to its beaches and to its historic old quarter is an ongoing challenge, and the city has suffered steep losses in revenue from the tourism sector.

The security threats that Mombasa faces are not, of course, confined to the city alone. Kenya has suffered several major terrorist attacks in recent years, including the attack on the US embassy in Nairobi in 1998, numerous attacks on hotels at the coast and, most recently, an attack on the Westgate Shopping Mall in 2013. There are many reasons why the country is a target for Islamic extremists: its large Muslim minority, its proximity to unstable neighbouring

states like Somalia, its relatively porous borders, its reputation as a key partner of the West and anger at its intervention in Somalia in 2011 among them.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the burden of effectively responding to terrorist threats lies predominantly with the national government.

Nevertheless, there are local dynamics involved which require city-level intervention. Poverty and

**Figure 5: Unemployment rate for 15–64 by County 2009**

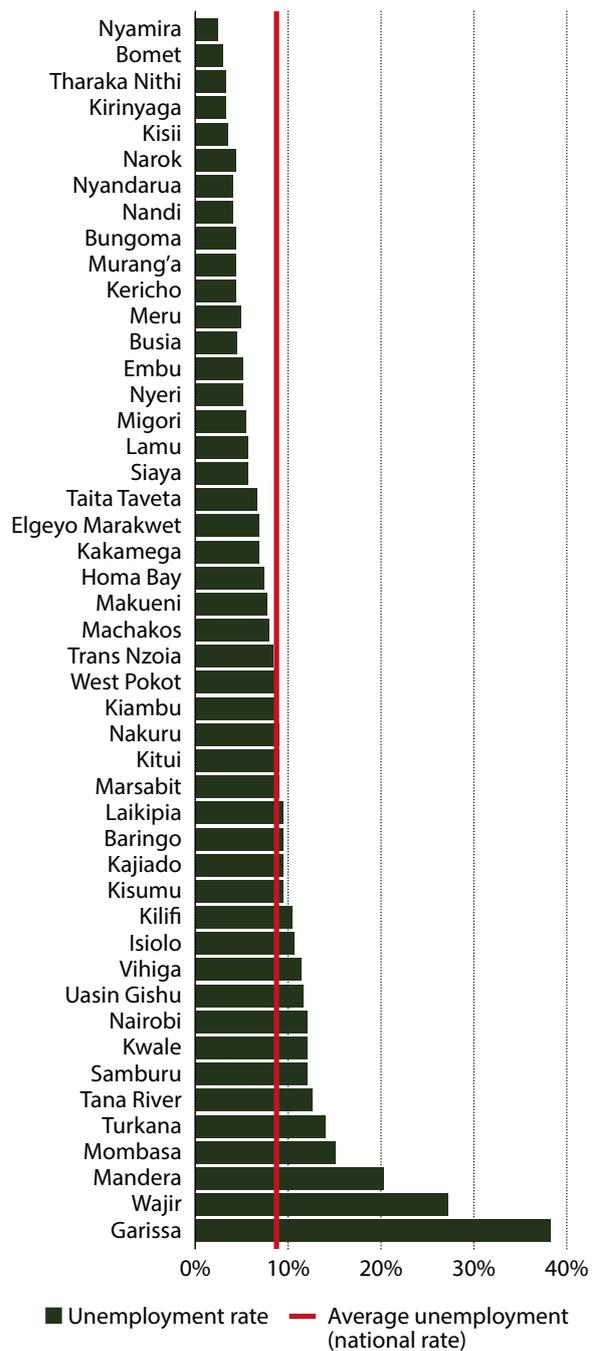


Figure 6: Mombasa County



inequality facilitate the spread of extreme ideologies in deprived and marginalised areas, and fuel support for the likes of al-Shabaab. The complex ethno-religious mix of the East African coast lends itself to intercommunal hostilities, and foreign terrorist groups like al-Shabaab exploit these to attract recruits. Young people are especially vulnerable to recruitment by al-Shabaab, given high unemployment rates and the absence of educational opportunities in and around Mombasa, especially relative to other parts of the country such as Nairobi. The Mombasa Republican Council was formed in 1999 in response to perceived injustices against the coastal Muslim community, with the clarion call of *Pwani si Kenya* – ‘Pwani is not a part of Kenya’. The local drivers of extremism in Mombasa involve economic and social grievances which the city must acknowledge and actively address. For example, smaller local extremist

organisations such as Al Hijra generally respond to specific local dynamics rather than to grander ideas about the spread of Islamist ideology in Kenya and the wider region.

The Kenyan government’s response has also on occasion appeared to stoke the flames of extremism, as in the case of Sheikh Abou Rogo, a Muslim cleric from Mombasa who was assassinated in a drive-by shooting in 2012. The popular belief, whether true or not, is that Abou Rogo was killed by the security forces. Campaigners allege systematic human rights abuses by the police, including 70 extrajudicial killings or disappearances between mid-2015 and 2016 in and around Mombasa. Many such incidents, according to journalist and global terrorism expert Jason Burke, ‘involve former members of al-Shabaab, or individuals alleged to be extremists’.<sup>4</sup> While the security forces have had some success in

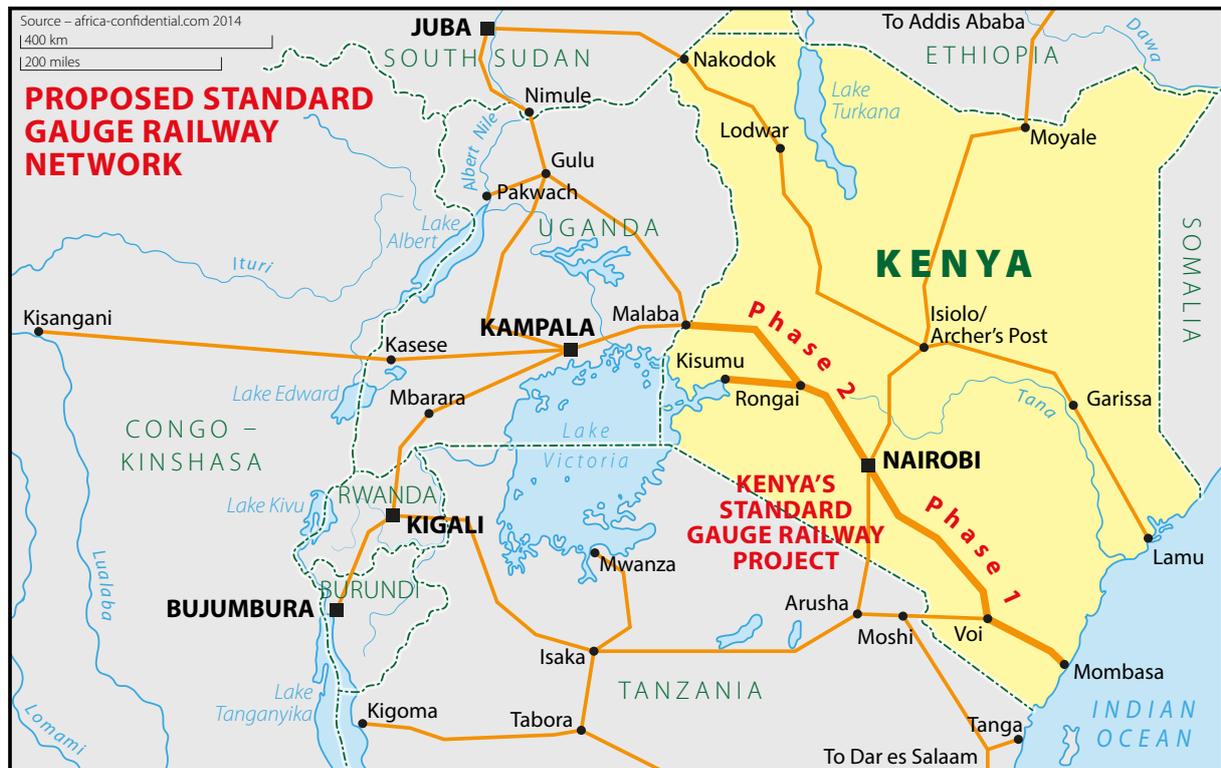
weakening and containing extremist groups, especially al-Shabaab, their actions have also worsened communal rifts and have in some cases contravened the rights of Mombasa’s citizens and angered human rights activists.

There are wider geopolitical dynamics at play which add to Mombasa’s security challenges. Mombasa’s location on the East African coast together with its busy port make it a natural gateway for drug trafficking through the Indian Ocean. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), large quantities of heroine are transported annually from Afghanistan through Iran or Pakistan to Mombasa, before being sold in the region or smuggled to Europe and North America. The emergence of Mombasa as a transit point for narcotics has led to increased international attention on the city, with investigations in recent years exposing sophisticated networks of drug traffickers, businesspeople and prominent local politicians. In 2015, over 15 tonnes of heroine were confiscated at Kilindini Harbour in one of the largest drug busts in history. Several members of the powerful Akasha family, alleged to control much of the illegal drug trade in Mombasa, are facing extradition to the

United States on criminal charges. The emergence of a lucrative underground world of drug trafficking, with rival cartels competing for control, threatens to destabilise the city and provoke violence similar to that experienced by various Latin American cities in the 1990s and 2000s. As Carina Bruwer notes, ‘the recent surge in heroin trafficking and consumption may contribute to further violence, insecurity and other forms of organised crime, all of which undermine regional development, security and the rule of law’.<sup>5</sup> At present, a combination of weak law enforcement, insufficient intelligence gathering, limited maritime surveillance and entrenched corruption provide conditions that are conducive to trafficking and associated crime.

As for legitimate economic competition more generally in the Indian Ocean Rim, the long-standing rivalry between Kenya and Tanzania over which country has the region’s most important port is intensifying. Mombasa and Tanzania’s Dar es Salaam port have traditionally vied for the lion’s share of maritime business but Kenya’s planned massive development of the Lamu Port to the north and Tanzania’s Bagamoyo – both of which are slated to be bigger than any existing port in sub-Saharan Africa

Figure 7: Kenya rail



– will add new dimensions and pressures to development processes in Mombasa.

Mombasa faces a range of imposing challenges, some of them similar to those encountered by many mid-sized, fast-growing African cities – for example, an infrastructure system that is insufficient to meet the demands of a burgeoning population, an

unskilled and uneducated workforce and high levels of youth unemployment – and others, like the threat of local extremist groups, which are unique to its context. As it enters the 21st century, more than 800 years after its establishment, what can be done to grow its economy and improve the lives of its citizens?

## Building a city for the future

Driving into Mombasa from Nairobi, one finds oneself inching slowly amidst a convoy of huge lorries carrying towers of shipping containers. As Kenya's main seaport and the genesis of the railway line that

The vision of Mombasa County is to become 'a vibrant modern regional commercial hub with a high standard of living for its residents'

runs across Kenya and into Uganda, Mombasa has always been an economic and transport hub for the region, critical to the import and export needs of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, South Sudan and even parts of Tanzania.

Yet for over a century, Mombasa has grown and expanded without any consistent policy vision to guide its development. That is not say there have been no plans; numerous official documents reveal a succession of proposed strategies to improve the city. Indeed, the first development plan for the city was formulated in 1926, and called for the improvement of transport infrastructure as well as of residential and industrial areas. The 1926 plan specified the subdivision of land into regular plots for commercial, residential and industrial zones. It also set aside land for the construction of additional roads and envisioned a new railway station separate from the main terminus.

The next official plan, the Mombasa Masterplan of 1962, purported to provide a long-term strategy for the entire municipality, and focused on the construction of housing, schools and road infrastructure to ease traffic. Most notable was its emphasis

on developing the mainland to ease congestion on the island, which had outgrown its facilities. That the mainland was not as developed and had limited access to infrastructure meant that the population was densely clustered on the island. Thus, the new plan recognised that a strategy was necessary to distribute resources across the entire municipality. A 1971 plan, the Mombasa Draft Physical Development Plan, continued the theme of improving infrastructure across the municipality, as well as renovating housing and waste disposal systems. This was complemented by another minor plan in the 1973 Mombasa Draft Transportation Report, which sought to expand the harbour in the area to better connect the extant infrastructures.

Over the years, these plans, while impressive on paper, were never implemented with the required commitment or resources. They suffered from a lack of adequate resources to allocate to major projects, and from a dearth of political will and necessary skills. An additional challenge was the fact that land was mostly privately-owned, which limited the state's ability to develop or repurpose it. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, none of the official plans prepared adequately for the high population growth that the city would experience. Too much development was centred on the island rather than the surrounding mainland, further worsening the dense crowding of Mombasa City.

Under current Governor Hassan Ali Joho, Mombasa has adopted a new plan which it refers to as Vision 2035, or the Integrated Strategic Urban Development Plan, adopted in 2016. With an expected cost of \$320 million, the blueprint mandates a series of projects to improve governance and economic development in order to consolidate the position of Mombasa as a 'commercial hub of

excellence’ in the region that ‘promotes diversity, natural environment and heritage’. Officially, the vision of Mombasa County is to become ‘a vibrant modern regional commercial hub with a high standard of living for its residents’. The plan would be funded through alliances with development partners, financiers and venture capitalists and through

By far the most pressing challenge that Mombasa’s plans must address is the absence of sufficient transport infrastructure to cope with the needs of the city economy

a series of Public Private Partnerships. In launching the plan, the Governor claimed that it would double Mombasa’s contribution to Kenya’s Gross Domestic Product (currently around 18 per cent, according to government estimates). In his address, he observed: ‘For the last 40 years the story of Mombasa is about lost opportunities. Mombasa should have marched into the present but instead it has limped. The population grew but the infrastructure remained the same. This is the tale of missed opportunities.’

Vision 2035, if implemented properly, should provide an immense boost to tourism and trade. A significant re-zoning programme with clear segmentation of the county into residential, commercial, industrial and agricultural zones would introduce much-needed organisation into the hitherto uncoordinated mushrooming of the urban landscape. Transport restrictions in areas such as the Old Town and the enhancement of Mama Ngina Drive – long an attraction for its street food and small-scale traders – with the creation of a bazaar and public park could deliver huge gains in quality of life for both residents and visitors. A series of planned coastal parks along Mombasa’s famed beaches would have a similar effect. In advancing the city’s industrial development, the Dongo-Kundu Special Economic Zone will be crucial, and is slated for launch in 2018 as a hub for commerce and manufacturing to provide employment to Mombasa citizens along the same lines as Nairobi’s Export Processing Zone. Its

construction will go hand in hand with the construction of the Dongo-Kundu bypass, a new corridor for the transport of goods.

By far the most pressing challenge that Mombasa’s plans must address is the absence of sufficient transport infrastructure to cope with the needs of the city economy. Mombasa is worn down by perennial congestion – whether in the form of *matatu* drivers or the constant movement from the port of dry bulk shipments such as grain, fertilizers and cement and liquid bulk products such as crude oil. Almost 900 000 shipping containers were transported through the port in 2014, with just fewer than 25 million tons of cargo. The opportunities provided by Mombasa’s position as a port city have been obstructed by crumbling infrastructure and the costs of wear and tear from transporting huge volumes of goods by road.

To this end, several major projects are proposed, including the construction of the Standard Gauge Railway and the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor. The first will update the colonial era railway line, with high-speed cargo and passenger trains running from Mombasa to Nairobi. The second, known as LAPSET in short, is an ambitious multi-step project which includes a port at Lamu which promises to ease congestion at the existing Mombasa Harbour, currently the largest seaport in the country. The Standard Gauge Railway in particular promises to have a large impact on the city, with the potential to reduce the current congestion in Mombasa by decreasing reliance on trucks and lorries to transport goods from the port. It is estimated that travel times from Mombasa to Nairobi will be reduced from roughly 10 hours by road to 4 hours using the new rail services. This will transform the city’s accessibility, allowing for people from the interior of Kenya to travel more easily to and from Mombasa for work, and will facilitate the faster, more efficient transport of goods and services.

Perceptions of Vision 2035 vary widely. Some leading officials believe that 20 years is far too short a timeline for achieving the wholesale changes proposed by the plan. One Mombasa County executive, Taufiq Balala, suggests that a plan with a longer time horizon would have been more reasonable. In contrast, the private sector generally seems to consider the timeline too long, with short-term implementation the real problem. Mohammed Hersi, the

CEO of Heritage Hotels, explained: ‘When I hear of a vision that is 20 years ahead, I wonder ... plans are great but what about [the implementation]?’ Mr Hersi feels that the current plan does not go far enough; he cites, for example, the need for more scheduled flights at an expanded Moi International Airport, and expresses concern over the state of the water and sewage infrastructure as well as electricity access.

Ultimately, the development of Mombasa has been hampered not by the absence of plans to guide it, but instead by the presence of successive plans (not always consistent in focus or approach) that have never been fully or effectively implemented. The strategic importance of Mombasa has led to intense

competition over the governorship and control of the region, and political motives threaten to slow or obstruct completely efforts to revitalise the city and invest in its infrastructure. Tensions between the centre and the periphery shape local politics – while the opposition remains in power, the central government has not moved to fast-track or support its development plans, according to critics. Vision 2035, the most recent iteration, provides a promising blueprint for the city – especially in expanding infrastructure to cope with the increasing volume of people and goods flowing in and out of Mombasa – but it will be of no use at all if it remains, as its predecessors, a set of good ideas on paper.

## Invisible walls – Mombasa’s potential in peril?

Political will and policy implementation are not the only hurdles on Mombasa’s horizon. Looming in the background are the ever-present social tensions that pervade the city, a product both of its complex history and its fractured present.

Mombasa is a testament to the plurality of Kenyan society, and one survey suggests that the government of Mombasa County is the most diverse in the country. Yet in his book *Usipoziba Ufa Utajenga Ukuta*<sup>6</sup>, Mwandawiro Mghanga demonstrates how the constructed myth of ‘Hakuna Matata’ corresponds to a larger myth about the political state of Kenya. In this national myth, the country is represented as an ‘island of peace, democracy and development in a sea of conflict’ in East Africa. But underlying and unaddressed tensions have challenged this perception, most recently and visibly expressed in the chaos and violence surrounding the 2007 elections. The rise of religious extremism has likewise brought to the fore deep schisms between the different communities of Mombasa and the Coast Province. The façade of ‘Hakuna Matata’ may be just starting to crumble in the minds of outsiders, but the cracks have always been visible to those who live in the city.

Mombasa is a site of many intersecting axes of difference, which combine to produce a highly fragile social environment. Amongst these dividing lines are those between the Black African community and the wealthier Asian and Arab communities;

between Christians, Muslims and those who adhere to indigenous African traditions; between people of inland origin (known as *wa bara* in Kiswahili) and those of the coast; and, interacting with and transcending all of these, between the rich and the poor. Indeed, wealth often appears to take precedence over ethnic identity; communities such as the Taita, which have historically been based in the Coast Province, are considered to be ‘wa bara’ in some discussions as they tend to be wealthier and have generally higher levels of education.

The façade of ‘Hakuna Matata’ may be just starting to crumble in the minds of outsiders, but the cracks have always been visible to those who live in the city

Private land is predominantly owned by Arab and Asian landlords, often absentee, as well as Kikuyu from the interior. This is despite the fact that in Mombasa, a majority of the population comprises groups that have historically lived at the coast, with Mijikenda the largest group at 31 per cent, Bajuni or Swahili 9 per cent, and Taita 7 per cent.

The largest proportion of inland inhabitants are those who descend from the Mt. Kenya region (the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru, who together comprise 10 per cent of Mombasa's population), the Kamba who comprise 9 per cent of the population<sup>7</sup>, and the Luhya and Kisii who make up 9 per cent and 4 per cent of the population respectively.

Inequality is clearly structured along ethnic and religious lines, whether measured by land ownership, levels of education, rates of employment or personal wealth

In terms of religion, Mombasa differs from other counties at the coast such as Lamu or Kwale, which are majority Muslim. In Mombasa, Muslims represent a significant minority, comprising 41 per cent of the population compared to the 58 per cent who belong to various Christian groups. Religious African traditions, while less prevalent in Mombasa than in more rural counties, are often practiced in syncretised forms alongside Christianity or Islam. The size of the Christian community is attributable to the high number of immigrants who moved to Mombasa from the interior.

When it comes to education, for every resident of inland origin without a full primary school education, there are six coastal residents who did not attend primary school at all. Income patterns, which correlate closely with educational attainment, reflect the same disparity, as people from the inland are twice as likely to be employed in either the private or public sector. In the highest wage bracket, there are significantly more people of inland origin than of coastal origin. Likewise, there are more high-income Christians than high-income Muslims. As Mghanga demonstrates, 'The Muslim coastal majority constitute most of the unemployed at the coast ... while the Christian upcountry minority form the more economically privileged inhabitants'. Inequality is clearly structured along ethnic and religious lines, whether measured by land ownership, levels of education, rates of employment or personal wealth.

These inequalities are most evident in the city's important tourism industry, with most hotel staff being Christian and of inland origin. Explanations for this disparity include the misperception that *halal* requirements place limitations on Muslim employees dealing with non-Muslim customers, as well as common caricatures of coastal people as being 'less disciplined' and 'irresponsible'. Muslims and people of coastal descent generally attribute their exclusion from the industry to the tribal nationalism of hotel operators, who are mostly of inland origin.

In addition to various forms of economic exclusion, land reform, so central to the mass struggle against colonialism, failed to eventuate as hoped. The politically connected at the time of independence benefitted disproportionately, and almost solely, from limited transfers of ownership. Today, some sources estimate that up to 80 per cent of the indigenous coastal population has no access to title deeds. Many indigenous groups within the region such as the Boni or Aweer, the Bajuni, the Sanye and the Orma have lived on particular areas of land for centuries and yet, without formal legal ownership, are considered to be squatters. This makes them highly vulnerable to exploitation by developers and unscrupulous elites, and has made the issue of land ownership a critical and increasingly heated political issue.

The roots of this fractious landscape lie in Kenya's colonial history, which exacerbated and in some cases created religious, ethnic and linguistic differences

The roots of this fractious landscape lie in Kenya's colonial history, which exacerbated and in some cases created religious, ethnic and linguistic differences. When the country achieved independence, the newly incumbent Kenyan government struggled to sew together a unified country from its divergent constituent elements. Many of the underlying issues that have created social divisions in the country and the region have yet to be acknowledged or actively

confronted by local authorities. In Mombasa, narratives of inclusion and exclusion are crucial to the identity of many citizens, and various racial, ethnic and religious groups are labelled as ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ depending on their origin and relative privilege.

These invisible social schisms add to the volatility of the city, and create an environment of political fragility and simmering conflict. This is perhaps the city’s primordial problem, linked inextricably to considerations of economic development, resource

provision and political inclusion. Indeed, if these social tensions are not addressed and defused, they have the potential to destabilise future attempts at development and reform. If certain groups feel marginalised or excluded from development plans, they may jeopardise their implementation. The provision of public goods is therefore insufficient. To avoid future conflict or resentment, they must be equitably distributed, and people of all communities must feel included in their production.

## Possibilities for progress

There is a real risk that ethnic violence triggered by flashpoint issues such as land ownership and inequality will erupt in Mombasa in the future, as it did sporadically in the 1990s. The city’s political balance is delicately poised. Nevertheless, the process of devolution – which began with a change to Kenya’s constitution in 2010 – may give local authorities the power and flexibility they need to address potential causes of conflict at source.

Prior to devolution, Mombasa was a municipality run by a council and overseen by a mayor. The municipality was divided into wards, each of which would elect a councillor to represent them. The councillors would then meet to elect a mayor who would oversee the entire municipality. The municipal structure existed alongside the parliamentary system, in which constituencies elected Members of Parliament to represent them in the national decision-making body.

The 2010 constitutional amendment enacted devolution across the country with the objective of placing more power in the hands of local government, allocating responsibility for service delivery to those officials who are closest to their constituents. Revenue is now allocated by the national government to each county government factoring in population, poverty levels and geographical size, over and above an amount that is divided equally between all of the 47 counties regardless of their differences. Counties are represented at the national level by senators; thus, rather than electing a Member of Parliament to represent their constituency, citizens instead elect a senator to represent the entire county. Crucially, devolution has led to changes in the municipal

structure. Instead of a mayor overseeing a council, a county assembly led by a governor oversees the entire county. Members of the county assembly meet to debate and vote on key issues affecting the county. The assembly, like the national senate, has a speaker, a majority leader and a minority leader. One of their responsibilities is to approve the members of the County Executive Committee. The Executive Committee is responsible for the delivery of key services in the county ranging from education to health, industry and the environment.

There is a real risk that ethnic violence triggered by flashpoint issues such as land ownership and inequality will erupt in Mombasa in the future

Devolution could be key to promoting peace and development in Mombasa. Firstly, the greater powers allocated to the county government should make it more agile and better able to respond to local concerns, including by reaching out to marginalised communities and ensuring their buy-in to development plans and infrastructure projects. Secondly, the fact that a single government now administers the entire county (as opposed to the city alone) means that it can take a broader view of development in the region, allocating greater resources to improving the towns and areas on the mainland around the city to reduce crowding on the island while improving

transport to and from the industrial and commercial centre. Thirdly, increased competition over control of the counties (and the growing importance of governorships) should force political parties to take local government more seriously. Finally, and most importantly, devolution will reduce the potential for political competition to obstruct development efforts, as the county government will no longer rely on central government approval or funding for its policies and projects. However, if devolution remains incomplete or poorly managed, these benefits will

not be felt. The proliferation of government entities with overlapping mandates, and the effects of intergovernmental politicking, could in fact hinder development. It is therefore crucial that county institutions are fully established, clearly defined and properly funded, and that the allocation of resources is transparent and depoliticised. While Mombasa has suffered for years from the effects of poisonous party politics, effective devolution could open the way for more responsive and focused government.

## Conclusion

The city of Mombasa faces steep challenges in the form of a fast-growing population, an ageing and insufficient infrastructure, low levels of education and high rates of youth unemployment, religious extremism, crime and state insecurity. It is plagued by the inadequate provision of water, electricity, education, sanitation and housing. Compounding these challenges are the simmering social tensions that lie beneath the surface and threaten to erupt. All of these factors are interconnected, feeding one another in a constant and self-perpetuating cycle. The urgency of expanding the city's infrastructure, growing its economy and improving the welfare of its population is therefore acute. As Mghanga puts it:

It is not true that there can be peace in the society while the majority of people lives in poverty and when the gap between the rich and the poor is widening every day ... similarly, the myth that historical injustices, both perceived and real, can be ignored with impunity and the nation continue to have peace and development has been shattered by the recent post-election violence in the country.

Ultimately, the greatest problem that Mombasa must contend with is that of inequality. Unequal development over decades, and indeed centuries, has prevented social mobility and led to the structural exclusion of large parts of the city's population from its economy. This requires action at both the national and local levels. Devolution has provided a greater sense of local ownership and responsibility amongst

the people, as Minister Taufiq Balala explains. However, certain functions remain in the control of the central government, and there is a need to coordinate national projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway with local projects such as the zoning of the city. Doing so effectively will be of benefit to both the local and national government, ensuring that the development of one project is fully complemented by the other.

On paper, major development projects slated for the near future promise to be of benefit to all. But it will require a concerted effort to ensure that these benefits are shared equitably in practice. Those in power will need to reach across the city's many divides to ensure that all of its citizens feel included in their grand vision for Mombasa's future, and to prevent the worsening of tensions or conflict. Underlying discontent, which is racially, ethnically and religiously charged, could erupt into violence or protest at any moment. The existence of unaddressed grievances provides ammunition for unscrupulous politicians who seek to exploit popular anger and fuel conflict to benefit their own agenda, and for extremists looking to recruit followers to their cause. This is especially important to keep in mind as the 2017 general elections rapidly approach, and as parties begin to galvanise support; while Mombasa emerged relatively unscathed from the violence of 2007, several protests by supporters of opposition leader Raila Odinga led to clashes with the police in 2016. Mombasa is a site of complex social conflict: it is a majority Christian city in a largely Muslim region, with a significant Muslim minority; it has historically

been populated by coastal ethnic groups but owned by those from upcountry. Each of these groups feels threatened by the others – the Muslim community fears Christian dominance, while Christians fear terrorism and extremism; coastal ethnic groups feel economically marginalised and underprivileged, while those of upcountry origin view their position as vulnerable and under attack. This makes for a fragile and volatile city environment, and increases the risk of violence and conflict if certain groups feel excluded from development projects or see others benefit disproportionately. Buy-in to the city's plans will be crucial to their success, and trust of the city's authorities and security forces is paramount.

Additionally, the question of land in Mombasa and the Coast Province as a whole is fraught with conflict and tied up with perceptions of historical injustice. At present, large communities in the city remain without formal title to their land, despite having lived there in some cases for generations. On the other hand, a wealthy elite owns most of Mombasa's commercial and residential property. This creates a challenge for development projects in multiple ways. On the one hand, it makes it difficult for the city authorities to make productive use of land, or to redistribute privately-owned land resources. On the other, it raises the possibility that certain communities will be displaced to make way for infrastructure projects. It is crucial that the government should consider the impact of development initiatives on local communities, respect their rights to the land on which they live, and make adequate provisions for their accommodation elsewhere if necessary. It is equally important that the private sector and individual landowners should be engaged to facilitate the productive use of private land as well. Given widespread discontent at the unequal distribution (along ethnic and religious lines) of land in the region, implementation of development plans must be sensitive to this volatile issue. If not, grievances could surface and feed the rise of secessionist movements and religious extremism.

As a general approach, investment in the city's development should be demand-driven rather than purely supply-driven. As one group of researchers writes of Mombasa:<sup>8</sup>

The programmes of government and NGOs alike tend to be supply-driven: there have been few attempts to respond to the expressed priority needs of poor people, let alone to involve them in planning and implementation.

Of particular importance is the need to invest in Mombasa's youth, from basic education to ensuring employment opportunities and supporting entrepreneurship in the city. Again, this investment will need to be cognisant of entrenched inequalities, ensuring that access to these opportunities is not restricted by class or ethnic and religious background.

While Mombasa's worries are profound, they are not insurmountable. A growing city with a rich and illustrious history, it has the potential to drive Kenya's economic growth and to cement itself as a haven of stability. Its development plan, articulated in Vision 2035, is imperfect but provides a feasible blueprint for reorganising and revitalising the city. Devolution has given Mombasa the power to do so, but effective implementation will require strong political will and the allocation of sufficient resources. Mombasa's previous development plans have faltered due to a lack of funds and a failure in execution. Nevertheless, with energetic and forward-looking leadership, Mombasa's prospects could be bright. Crucially, the city's development plans must be implemented in full if they are to be successful – partial or sporadic implementation could produce unforeseen difficulties. For example, the Standard Gauge Railway will improve transport between Mombasa and Nairobi, but county government officials predict that, if not properly integrated with city plans for development, it could actually worsen congestion.

Ultimately, there is an abiding sense of optimism about the way forward in Mombasa. As the Standard Gauge Railway comes to life, and with the construction of the Mombasa Port Area Development Project, the city seems poised to undergo an unprecedented transformation in the near future. Notwithstanding the perception of Mombasa amongst Nairobi residents as a place of slow motion, the scene at Kilindini Harbor offers a glimpse at a possible future for the city. Here, a crowd of people moves impatiently forwards, craning their necks to watch a large ship approach. As the ferry inches towards the dock,

bicycles line up next to one another, vehicles rev their engines, pedestrians pulse forward and the ship's passengers spill into the harbour as soon as the ferry has docked. For a brief flicker of time, the ferry floats upon the still waters of the Indian Ocean, before being swarmed again by the next group of hurried passengers. The dynamism of the crowd, and of the city, is palpable; the question is, can it be harnessed?

## Endnotes

- 1 Mwandawiro Mghanga, *Usipoziba Ufa Utajenga Ukuta: Land, Elections, and Conflicts in Kenya's Coast Province*. (Nairobi: Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2010), p. 59.
- 2 Carole Rakodi et al., 'Poverty and Political Conflict in Mombasa'. *Environment and Urbanisation* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 2000).
- 3 Samuel L Aronson, 'Kenya and the Global War on Terror', *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* (No. 7, 2013), pp. 25–34.
- 4 *The Guardian* 28 August 2016.
- 5 Carina Bruwer, 'From Afghanistan to Africa: Heroin trafficking in East Africa and the Indian Ocean', *The Daily Maverick*, 21 June 2016.
- 6 Full title *Usipoziba Ufa Utajenga Ukuta: Land, elections and conflicts in Kenya's coastal province*.
- 7 Some Kamba have deep roots in the region, having been long-distance traders who travelled to the coast prior to colonial rule and converted to Islam.
- 8 Rakodi, *op. cit.*

## Bibliography

- Adam Smith International. 2013. *Creating employment opportunities for young people in Mombasa* (London: ASI, 2013).
- Samuel L Aronson, 'Kenya and the Global War on Terror', *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* (No. 7, 2013), pp. 25–34.
- Galgalo Bocha, 'Once a Source of Life for Villagers, Lamu's Boni Forest Is Now Home of Terror', *The Daily Nation*, 8 September 2015. Accessed 20 January 2017.
- Abdullahi Boru, 'Kenya Must Engage with Mombasa Republican Council, Not Demonise It', *Saban Journal*, 27 July 2013. Accessed 29 January 2017.
- Carina Bruwer, 'From Afghanistan to Africa: Heroin trafficking in East Africa and the Indian Ocean', *The Daily Maverick*, 21 June 2016.
- County Government of Mombasa. 2016. Integrated Strategic Urban Development Plan. Available at <https://www.mombasa.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/INTEGRATED-STRATEGIC-URBAN-DEVELOPMENT-PLAN-MOMBASA-VISION-2035-.pdf>.
- Elsje Fourie, 'Model Students: Policy Emulation, Modernization, and Kenya's Vision 2030', *African Affairs* (No. 113, 2014), pp. 540–62.
- Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. 2009. *Kenya Population and Housing Census*. Available at [www.knbs.or.ke/](http://www.knbs.or.ke/).
- Kenya National Police Service. 2014. *Annual Crime Report*. Available at [www.nationalpolice.go.ke/crime-statistics.html](http://www.nationalpolice.go.ke/crime-statistics.html).
- Kenya Ports Authority. 2015. *KPA Annual Report*. Available at [www.kpa.co.ke/Pages/Annual-Financial-Reports.aspx](http://www.kpa.co.ke/Pages/Annual-Financial-Reports.aspx).
- IRIN. 2015. 'Kenya's Coastal Separatists – Menace or Martyrs?' *IRIN News*, 1 December. Accessed 30 January 2017.
- Joe Khamisi, *The Wretched Africans: A Study of Rabai and Freretown Slave Settlements* (Plano, TX: Jodey Books, 2016).
- Kenya Human Rights Commission. 2015. *Forgotten in the Scramble for Lamu*. Available at <http://www.khrc.or.ke/2015-03-04-10-37-01/press-releases/442-forgotten-in-the-scramble-for-lamu.html>.
- Mwandawiro Mghanga, *Usipoziba Ufa Utajenga Ukuta: Land, Elections, and Conflicts in Kenya's Coast Province*. (Nairobi: Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2010).

- Maureen Murimi, 'Eight Al Shabaab Suspects Arrested in Somalia', *Citizen TV*, 29 June 2016. Accessed 20 January 2017.
- Mazera Ndurya, 'How Squatters Became Land Owners in Lamu', *The Daily Nation*, 29 June 2014. Accessed 20 January 2017.
- Carole Rakodi et al., 'Poverty and Political Conflict in Mombasa'. *Environment and Urbanisation* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 2000).
- Benard Sanga, 'Mombasa Has the Most Ethnically Inclusive Staff', *The Standard*, 10 May 2015. Accessed 29 January 2017.
- Japan International Cooperation Agency. 2012. *Mombasa Port Area Development Project*. Available at <http://www.ke.emb-japan.go.jp/files/000140408.pdf>.
- Liz Alden Wiley, 'How African Governments Allow Farmers to Be Pushed off Their Land', *Poverty Matters Blog*, 2 March 2012. London: Guardian News and Media.

***Select interviews conducted in Mombasa:***

- Minister Anthony Njaramba of Mombasa County Government  
Minister Taufiq Balala of Mombasa County Government  
Mohamed Hersi of Heritage Hotels Group  
Paras Shah of Umoja Rubber Products Limited