

**County watch:**

The coastal county doesn't need more value addition slogans, but a blunt instrument applied to its budget



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# Why Mombasa is still waiting for its ship to dock



Mombasa City. For every ten litres of water that enter the system, six litres vanish. ARCHIVES

**M**ombasa, is arguably the Gateway to East Africa thanks to its bustling maritime hub. It is a romantic, high-gloss image; where the Indian Ocean meets the continent, ostensibly fueling growth for millions of people across the region.

The official brochures speak of a New Beginning. The county government talks about modernising health and empowering youth. It all sounds very transformative, very forward-looking, and very expensive. Except, there's a problem. A big one.

If you look at the actual numbers, the ones the bureaucrats hope you are too busy stuck in Nyali Bridge traffic to notice, Mombasa isn't a gateway at all. It is becoming a bottleneck.

And it is not the kind of bottleneck caused by a busy port. It is the kind caused by a leaky wallet and a refusal to acknowledge basic arithmetic. Let us start with the Gross County Product.

In 2024, the data shows Mombasa's economy sat at roughly Ksh710.79 billion (\$5.51 billion). On paper, that makes it the fourth-largest economy in Kenya. You would think that being the host of the region's largest port would make Mombasa an economic sprinter. But it isn't.

While the national economy tries to find its feet, Mombasa's contribution to the national wealth has remained stagnant at about 4.8 per cent for years. Surely, if you own the only gas station on a busy highway, you should be getting richer every year.

But Mombasa is like that gas station owner who keeps the lights on but never seems to have enough cash to fix the pumps. Clearly, the wealth of the port is washing over the city like a tide that never quite reaches the shore.

**Leaky bucket**

To understand why the city is stalling, you have to look at the Wage bill. Imagine you are running a household. You have a leaky roof and the front door is falling off its hinges. Instead of buying nails and iron sheets, you decide to spend nearly half of your entire income just on paying the people who sit around your kitchen table discussing how to fix the roof.

That is exactly what Mombasa is

doing. According to the Controller of Budget reports for the 2024/2025 financial year, Mombasa's personnel emoluments, that is salaries and benefits, are gobbling up a staggering 43.8 per cent of its total expenditure. The Public Finance Management Act, says you should not spend more than 35 per cent.

Mombasa is not just over the limit; it is practically living in another solar system of fiscal indiscretion. When you spend that much on administrative overhead, there is simply nothing left for the actual city. You cannot pave a road with a civil servant's pay slip.

**Billion-shilling hole**

This is where we find the lead domino. If we want to fix Mombasa, we do not need more value addition seminars. We need to fix the water.

The Water Services Regulatory Board (WASREB) and the Senate have been sounding the alarm on Non-Revenue Water. In plain English, this is water that is produced but never paid for. In Mombasa, that figure is a shocking 62 per cent.

Think about that. For every ten litres of water that enter the system, six litres vanish. They disappear into illegal connections, unmetered pipes, or simply leak into the ground. In a January 2026 Senate hearing, the testimony was devastating. Mombasa loses Ksh1.2 billion every year to this leak.

Is Ksh1.2 billion a lot of money? In a \$5.5 billion economy, it might look like a rounding error. But we are not talking about the whole economy; we are talking about what the county actually gets to spend. Mombasa's annual development budget, the money used to build hospitals and fix roads, is roughly Ksh4.9 billion.

If the county pulled that one single lever, it would find an entire second budget. Closing that water leak is a 24 per cent increase in the county's power to build a better future. It is the difference between a city that can afford its own sewers and a city that has to go to the World Bank, cap in hand, begging for loans for projects it should have been able to fund itself.

There is a deeper irony here. Mombasa has almost no water source

of its own. It relies on its neighbors. It takes water from Kwale, Kilifi, and Taita Taveta.

Mombasa is like a man who begs his neighbor for a bucket of water because his own well is dry, only to walk home with a bucket that has a massive hole in the bottom. It is not only a management failure but also a moral one. You cannot ask your neighbors for a precious resource and then throw more than half of it away.

**Global mirror**

Is this just how things are in port cities? Hardly. Look at Colombo, Sri Lanka. A few decades ago, Colombo was a chaotic port city with many of the same leakage issues Mombasa has today. But Colombo did not just wait for a national Equitable Share check. They aggressively digitized their revenue collection and integrated their port-city logistics.

By creating the Port City Colombo Special Economic Zone, they ensured that the wealth generated by the ships actually trickled into the municipal coffers. They did not hire more clerks; they installed

better software. Today, Colombo's infrastructure, from its automated traffic systems to its integrated waste management, is light years ahead of Mombasa's. They stopped treating the port as a separate entity and started treating it as the city's heart.

Mombasa, by contrast, treats the port like a wealthy neighbor. It is too shy to ask for a cup of sugar.

**The verdict**

The Auditor General's Green Book for 2024 is full of adverse opinions regarding Mombasa's books. There are billions in pending bills money owed to local contractors who are going broke while waiting for a check that may never come. Mombasa does not need more value addition slogans. It needs a blunt instrument applied to its budget. It needs to fire the ghost workers, fix the pipes, and stop pretending that a 16.5 per cent revenue shortfall is a success. Until then, the Gateway will remain closed.

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