

County watch:

The government has declared Tana River County the next great metallic mineral hub of Kenya. KENYA CHAMBER OF MINES



# Tana River's manganese mirage

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There's no better demonstration of the Resource Curse in its most primal, unprocessed form, than a look at Tana River. The political air in the Tana Delta is thick with the scent of a new kind of gold.

The government has officially declared Tana River the next great Metallic Mineral Hub of Kenya. And this is not the small-scale sand harvesting that has sustained the local black market for years; we are talking about large-scale manganese deposits in the Lali Hill area, the high-grade material essential for the global lithium-ion battery revolution.

But there's an underlying structural failure. Tana River is a county that is building a Ksh 1.7 billion bridge to connect a 19th-century subsistence economy to a 21st-century global market. It is the ultimate case of Infrastructure Without Institutions. We are installing a high-pressure turbine on a pipe system that is currently held together by duct tape and relief-food rhetoric.

### Manganese gamble

The lead domino for Tana River is the National Manganese Strategy launched this quarter. Manganese is the backbone of modern steel and green energy. Tana River sits on massive, structurally controlled deposits that could, in theory, turn the county from a Net Recipient of national aid into a Net Contributor to the National Treasury.

However, the reality check is brutal: Potential is not Revenue. While the National Government is scouting for multi-billion shilling investors, the local Tana River Project Implementation unit is a ghost. In the 2026 County Fiscal Strategy Paper, the county continues to grapple with an Own-Source Revenue that barely registers on the national scale.

They are waiting for a Mining Miracle to fix their budget, while failing to collect basic cess from the gypsum trucks already tearing up the roads in Tana North. This is a classic Liquidity Trap, the county is rich in assets but broke in cash because it lacks the basic bureaucratic plumbing to capture value. If you can't tax a truck full of rocks leaving your backyard today, what makes you think you can tax a multinational mining conglomerate tomorrow?

### Ksh1.7 billion paradox

The new Tana River Bridge, set for commissioning later this year, is a 150-meter engineering marvel. It is intended to bridge the gap between the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor

and the hinterlands, providing a literal path for wealth to flow.

But a bridge is only as useful as the cargo crossing it. Right now, Tana River's main export isn't manganese or processed agricultural goods, it is a plea for drought relief. This is the Infrastructure Paradox. We are building a high-speed bridge for a county that is still walking in the mud of administrative lethargy.

Despite having the Tana River, the longest life-blood in the country, the county's irrigation potential remains a series of pilot projects and flagship PowerPoint slides. The bridge will be finished, the ribbon will be cut, and then what? Unless there is a massive shift in how the county manages its water and its land, that bridge will primarily be used by trucks carrying raw materials out of the county, leaving nothing but dust and empty pockets behind.

### Gypsum leak

Let's talk about the Leak in the Tana River system. In the northern parts of the county, Gypsum mining is already a multi-million shilling industry. Go to Bura or Madogo, and you will see the white dust of prosperity. But look at the county's bank account, and the dust disappears.

Because the county lacks an automated, point-of-source collection system, the revenue from this white gold is leaked at every turn. There are reports of informal barriers where payments are made in cash and never reach the county treasury. It is the same Collection Courage problem we saw in Kilifi, but amplified by the sheer vastness of Tana's terrain. In Tana River, the gap between what is extracted and what is taxed is wide enough to drive a semi-truck through. Until the county moves from Barrier Collection to Digital Auditing, the minerals of Tana River will benefit everyone but the people of Tana River.

### The Tana delta

Later this year, when the world gathers for the Our Ocean Conference at the coast, Tana River should be a headline act. The Tana Delta is one of the most productive ecosystems on the planet, a nursery for the Indian Ocean's fish stocks. Yet, Tana River's Blue Economy strategy is essentially non-existent.

While neighboring counties are fighting over fish processing plants, Tana River is content to let its vast deltaic resources be harvested by outsiders with zero value addition. The county allocates millions to administrative travel but barely a pittance to the cold-chain infrastructure that would allow a fisherman in Kipini to sell his catch in Nairobi for three times the price. This is a textbook case of Resource Misallocation. It is the economic equivalent of owning a bakery but buying your bread from the supermarket next door.

### Knowledge gap trap

CS Joho recently challenged the residents to shun myths about mining, specifically claims that mineral

extraction leads to infertility or attracts evil spirits. While these sound like colourful local anecdotes, they represent a Knowledge Gap that is a massive barrier to entry for capital.

When a community is scared of a mine, they don't demand a stake in it, they demand it go away. This allows unscrupulous actors to operate in the shadows. Tana River needs a County Investment Corporation that does more than just host workshops in Malindi. It needs to educate its people on the chemistry of manganese and the economics of royalties. Education is the Lead Domino that turns a scared population into a formidable group of shareholders. You cannot have a 21st-century mineral economy with a medieval understanding of geology.

### The Galana-Kulalu shadow

We cannot talk about Tana River without mentioning the ghost of Galana-Kulalu. For years, this million-acre irrigation scheme was touted as the Food Basket of Kenya. Today, it stands as a monument to what happens when Central Planning meets Local Inefficiency.

The National Government is currently trying to privatise sections of the scheme to make it viable. But the Tana River County government has remained largely a passive observer in this process. By failing to integrate the Galana-Kulalu output into its own local value chains, by not building the mills, the silos, and the transport hubs, Tana River is allowing its most fertile soil to be used by others to build wealth that never touches the local treasury. It is the ultimate Extractive Economy, even in agriculture.

### The verdict

Tana River is a county that has been waiting since 1963. It waited for the river to be dammed, it waited for the bridge to be built, it is now waiting for the mine to be opened. But waiting is not a policy. The machines are coming for Lali Hill. The Multi Billion bridge is almost ready. But if the county doesn't fix its internal revenue leaks, resolve its land-tenure confusion, and stop treating the Tana River as a scenic backdrop rather than an industrial engine, it will remain exactly what it is today, a wealthy desert.

The tragedy of Tana River isn't that it lacks resources, it's that it lacks the institutional plumbing to keep those resources from flowing straight to Mombasa and Nairobi. The bridge is a tool. The manganese is a fuel. But the county government is currently an engine with no spark. It is time to stop blaming the desert and start blaming the ledger.

The writer is a mechanical engineer and co-founder at Humanity Amplified AI Inc.

Next week we explore Lamu County, the World's most expensive Cul-de-Sac and how its connectivity is no longer being governed by trade economists but by counter-insurgency logic.

## THE BILLION PARADOX

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