

County watch:

A view of Mandera Town. ARCHIVES

The triple-border turbine at Mandera



by Edgar Mulei
@PeopleDailyKe

If you stand at the No Man's Land where Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia meet, you aren't just looking at a security frontier. You are looking at one of the most under-leveraged economic turbines in East Africa. Mandera is often whispered about in Nairobi as a place of distance and difficulty, but the Mandera County 2025/2026 Programme Based Budget tells a different story. It tells the story of a county trying to engineer its way out of isolation through a massive Ksh 15.4 Billion fiscal plan.

Mandera is a Geopolitical Pivot Economy. It is the only county in Kenya that shares an active, high-traffic border with two sovereign nations simultaneously. It has allocated a significant Ksh 5.8 Billion to development, nearly 38 per cent of its total budget. This is a bold Hardware Upgrade. While other counties are drowning in recurrent wage bills, Mandera is betting its future on physical assets: markets, clinics, and solar-powered water systems.

The Horn of Africa gateway project

The Lead Domino for Mandera transformation is the completion of the final segments of the Isiolo-Mandera Highway. For sixty years, Mandera was effectively a landlocked island within Kenya, separated by a sea of

mud and dust that could swallow a truck for a week. As of this quarter, the paving of the Elwak-Rhamu stretch has entered its final phase.

In engineering terms, this is a Resistance Reduction project. A road isn't just asphalt but a reduction in the Ohmic loss of trade. When a truck can move from Mandera to Nairobi in 24 hours instead of five days, the effective cost of every goat and every bag of cement in Mandera drops by 40 per cent.

However, there is a looming Extraction Risk. If Mandera only builds the road out, it will simply become a feeder for Nairobi's markets. The county must build the Load Centers, the industrial zones in Rhamu and Elwak, to ensure that value is added to the livestock and oilseeds before they hit the highway.

Riverine revolution

Unlike its neighbors, Mandera has the Daua River, a seasonal but powerful water source that defines its northern border. In the 2025/2026 Annual Development Plan, the county has intensified its investment in riverine fruit production. Mandera is already the Watermelon Capital of Kenya, but the 2026 pivot is toward Cold-Chain Integration.

Think of the Daua River as a seasonal battery. It charges the soil for four months, but the energy currently spoils before it can be discharged into distant markets. The county's plan to commission three massive solar-powered cold-

storage hubs along the river is a Storage Solution for a perishable economy. If a farmer can hold their harvest for an extra two weeks, they move from being a price-taker at the mercy of brokers to a price-setter in the regional market.

Ksh15.4b security premium

Mandera operates under a Security Surcharge that most Kenyan counties never have to calculate. Everything from a bag of nails to a kilowatt of power costs more because of the logistical and insurance premiums associated with the border.

The 2026 budget recognises this by allocating substantial funds to decentralised service delivery; building small, resilient hubs in places like Banisa and Lafey rather than one giant, vulnerable center in Mandera Town.

This is System Redundancy. In engineering, you don't rely on one giant transformer; you build a distributed network so that if one part fails, the whole system doesn't go dark. By spreading its developmental weight, Mandera is making its economy anti-fragile.

However, the Recurrent Ghost still haunts the books. With a wage bill and operations cost of Ksh9.6 billion, Mandera is still carrying a heavy administrative backpack. To shed this weight, the county is looking at Digital Revenue Centers to capture trade fees from the cross-border livestock flow that currently bypasses the official books.

Solar-industrial nexus

One of the most exciting shifts this year is the Mandera Solar Micro-Grid Expansion. Because the national grid is distant and unreliable, Mandera is leapfrogging the 20th century. In February, the county finalised partnerships to solarise its major hospitals and the Mandera Livestock Export Zone.

This is an Energy Dividend. If you want to run a slaughterhouse that meets international export standards for the Middle East, you need consistent refrigeration. You cannot do that on diesel alone, the thermal efficiency is too low and the cost is too high.

By anchoring its industrial zones to dedicated solar farms, Mandera is creating an Island of Stability. This year's goal is to move from live-animal exports to chilled-meat exports. One ton of chilled meat carries three times the profit of one ton of live cattle, and it requires 100 per cent less fodder during transit.

Cross-Border Arbitrage

Finally, we must talk about the Somali-Ethiopian Trade Corridor. Mandera is the natural warehouse for a three-nation market. The 2026 Regional Integration Plan focuses on the Rhamu border point, which connects to the fertile highlands of Ethiopia.

This is Market Arbitrage. Ethiopia has the grain; Somalia has the fish and consumer goods; Mandera has the middle-ground and the Kenyan market access. By building the Rhamu International Market,

Mandera is positioned to collect the commission on this entire regional exchange.

The Dead Asset here is the lack of a standardised currency or banking bridge at the border. Until the county and the National Government can facilitate a Trade Settlement Desk, much of this wealth will remain in the gray market, enriching individuals but leaving the county treasury dry.

The Verdict

Mandera is a county that has stopped seeing itself as the end of the road and started seeing itself as the beginning of the region. It is a turbine that is just starting to spin. The 2026 budget shows a county that is finally matching its high ambitions with hard concrete execution.

The victory for Mandera depends on its ability to solve the Highway Paradox. The road to Nairobi is a two-way street; it can bring wealth in, or it can suck raw resources out. To stay on top, Mandera must be obsessed with Value Retention.

It needs the cold rooms, the solar-powered slaughterhouses, and the formalised border markets. If Mandera can turn its Triple-Border location from a security headache into a commercial headquarters, it will become the undisputed economic capital of the North.

The writer is a mechanical engineer and co-founder at Humanity Amplified AI Inc. Next week, we will tackle Mar-sabit's struggle to tax the sky

The devolved unit is betting its future on physical assets: markets, clinics, and solar-powered water systems to power its growth