County watch:

Wajir's race to tap the liquid horizon

The devolved unit has proven it can spend; now it must prove it can build an industrial base that doesn't rely on the next exchequer transfer

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The real economy of Wajir isn't found in its government offices, but in the hum of the diesel generators that dot the horizon. These generators are the heartbeat of the county's boreholes, the only thing standing between a multi-billion shilling livestock industry and total collapse. Yet, if you look at the Wajir County 2025/2026 Programme Based Budget, you see a fiscal engine that is firing on more cylinders than its neighbors, even as it struggles with a massive underground challenge.

Wajir is a county defined by what I call Sub-Surface Sovereignty. Unlike Garissa, which leans on the visible Tana River, Wajir relies on a hidden sea of groundwater. This year's data shows a total projected budget of Ksh13.99 billion, with a healthy Ksh5.28 billion allocated to development.

In an economic lens, Wajir is currently a high-absorption machine. Last cycle, it stunned the critics by achieving an 83.4 per cent development absorption rate, ranking third nationally. While other counties are letting their development funds sit in a vault, Wajir is actually putting pipes in the ground and bitumen on the roads.

The Horn of Africa gateway

The Lead Domino for the transformation of Wajir county is the Horn of Africa Gateway Development Project. This is a massive, World Bank-funded effort to pave the Isiolo-Mandera corridor, which cuts right through the heart of Wajir. As of now, the government has fast-tracked the security management plans to ensure the asphalt reaches Wajir without interruption.

In the world of logistics, this is a Friction Reduction project. Historically, Wajir was an island of sand. The cost of transporting a liter of milk or a bag of cement was inflated by the tax of the terrain, the mechanical wear and tear of a thousand-kilometer washboard road.

By bridging this gap with bitumen, the National Government is effectively plugging Wajir into the global supply chain. However, there is a risk. If Wajir only provides the road and doesn't build the docking stations, the cold-storage hubs and processing plants, the county will simply watch wealth drive through it at high speed, bound for the ports of the south. The goal must be to turn Wajir from a drive-through into a destination.

Water-livestock linkage

Let's look at the Efficiency Gain in Wajir's primary sector. Agriculture and Livestock have been prioritised in the 2025/2026 Annual Development Plan, focusing on moving from raw volume to quality. In January, the Cabinet greenlit a Ksh9.7 billion Livestock Value Chain Support Project that directly impacts Wajir's ability to export beef and dairy rather than just live animals.

Think of the livestock industry as a thermal engine. The fuel is water and fodder. Currently, Wajir's engine is overheating because the cost of fuel, specifically borehole maintenance, is too high. The Wajir Water and Sewerage Company is currently intensifying efforts to takeover and digitise additional boreholes to prepare for a cleaner delivery to Wajir Town.

If the county can successfully transition these boreholes from expensive diesel to the solar surplus we see in the region, the profit margin per cow doubles overnight. Wajir isn't just selling meat but also the efficiency of its water management. To sustain this, the county is investing in hay production schemes along the perimeters of these boreholes, creating a localised circular economy.

Ksh13.9 billion balancing act

Despite the high absorption rate, Wajir is still trapped in a Dependency Loop. With recurrent expenditure sitting at Ksh8.71 billion, which is 62.3 per cent of the budget, the county is still spending a lot of money just to keep the lights on and the payroll running. We are seeing a massive Idling Loss where the administrative machinery consumes more energy than it produces in tangible growth.

To break this cycle, the 2026 Fiscal Strategy Paper targets a more aggressive Own-Source Revenue collection. Like Garissa, Wajir has a massive shadow economy in its livestock markets. If the county can formalise the trade passing through the border points with Somalia and Ethiopia, it moves from being a beggar at the national table to being a regional trade master. The goal isn't just to collect more taxes; it's to build a system where the tax reflects the actual volume of trade. Currently, the leakage at the border is like a cracked manifold; wealth is escaping before it ever reaches the county treasury.

Desalination move

One of the most ambitious projects for 2026 is the expansion of water treatment plants. In February, the Northern Water Works Development Agency issued tenders for a series of water supply projects including the Eldas-Lokoley and Griftu schemes. This represents a Technology Leapfrog. Wajir has plenty of water, but much of it is saline. By investing in industrial-scale desalination and treatment, the county is effectively creating a new resource out of thin air.

For a town like Wajir, which has grown faster than its infrastructure, this is the only way to avoid a Malthusian catastrophe where the population outstrips the available clean water. The challenge, however, is the Last Mile connectivity. It is one thing to desalinate water at a central plant; it is another to pipe it into the homes of a sprawling town without losing 62 per cent to illegal connections and old, leaky infrastructure, like it happens in Mombasa.

Energy paradox of the North

Wajir sits in a region with some of the highest solar irradiation in the world, yet it remains tethered to expensive, centralised power. In the 2026 outlook, there is a growing push for decentralised mini-grids. If you want to run a tannery or a milk-chilling plant, you cannot rely on the current fragile grid. This is where the Infrastructure Paradox hits the hardest. We have the space, the sun, and the demand, but we lack the Grid-Tie logic.

The county's 2026 plan to subsidise solar kits for small-scale industrial units is a start, but it needs to be scaled. Without cheap, reliable power, Wajir's meat will always be cheaper to transport live to Nairobi than to process locally. It is essentially exporting its industrial potential every time a livestock truck leaves the county.

The verdict

Wajir is a county that is successfully punching above its weight in budget execution. It has figured out how to spend its development money, which is half the battle in a devolved system. However, the final victory depends on its ability to turn the Isiolo-Mandera Highway into more than just a bypass. The county must act to solidify its sub-surface sovereignty. It needs to finish the shift from diesel-powered boreholes to solar-powered grids, reducing the operating cost of its livestock.

It must also move aggressively to capture the value of its meat at the source before the animals start the long trek to the slaughterhouses of Nairobi. Wajir has proven it can spend; now it must prove it can build an industrial base that doesn't rely on the next exchequer transfer. If Wajir can connect its high absorption rate to high-value industrial output, it won't just be the third-best at spending money; it will be the first-best at creating it.

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Next week, we dive deep on Mandera's Triple-Border Turbine.

A View of Wajir Town. The Lead Domino for the transformation of Wajir County is the Horn of Africa Gateway Development Project. ARCHIVES