

The Chronicle

WEEKLY

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The deeper sickness in Kenya's health system, beyond SHA

KENYA'S HEALTH CRISIS IS ABOUT MONEY, MANPOWER AND WHETHER THE SYSTEM CAN ACTUALLY DELIVER WHEN KENYANS NEED IT



Why Kenyans feel poorer despite lower inflation, stronger economy

ECONOMIC INDICATORS POINT TO RECOVERY, BUT MILLIONS OF KENYANS CONTINUE STRUGGLING AS HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES OUTPACE INCOMES

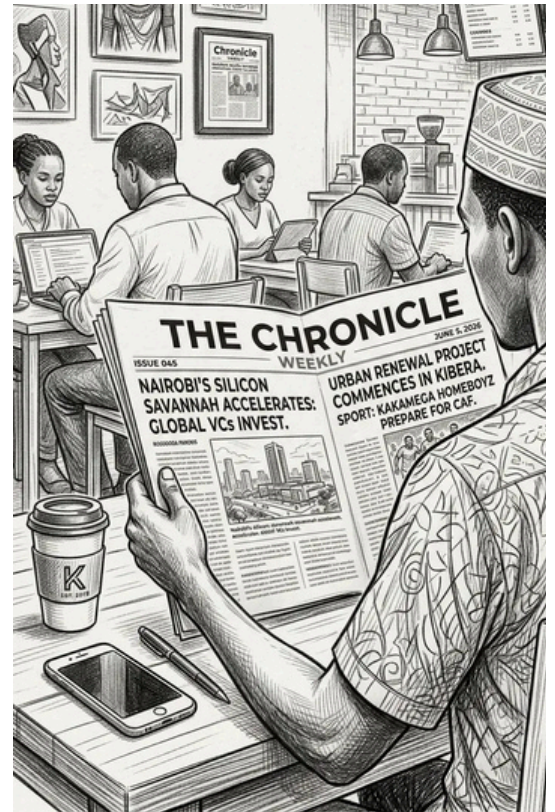
Blind Spot: 2027 national politics overshadow important local polls

PRESIDENTIAL ARITHMETIC, COALITION TALK, KENYA KWANZA SCRUTINY SUCKING UP ALL ATTENTION, WHILE LOCAL ELECTIONS GET TREATED AS AFTERTHOUGHTS

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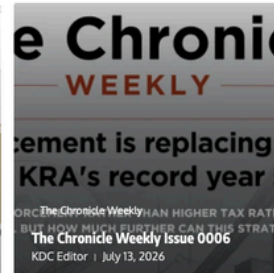
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Friday, July 17, 2026



Latest



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While the Kenya Daily Chronicle delivers a mix of breaking news and real-time updates across politics, business, health, sports, and lifestyle, the Weekly is its considered, curated counterpart; a deeper read for audiences who want more than headlines.

Published every Monday, The Chronicle Weekly distils the most important stories of the preceding week into a single, authoritative edition. It brings together the Kenya Daily Chronicle's signature editorial strengths: rigorous political reporting, sharp business analysis, contextual perspectives, and vibrant community coverage, in a format designed to be read, saved, and shared.

The Chronicle Weekly occupies a distinct space in Kenya's media landscape: it is neither a wire-driven news feed nor a long-form magazine, but a weekly newspaper of record; structured, comprehensive, and grounded in the journalistic values that define the Kenya Daily Chronicle. Every edition is built around the belief that informed Kenyans make better decisions, stronger communities, and a more accountable nation.

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Editorial Note

This week's cover asks a question Kenya has mostly stopped asking out loud: not "is SHA working," but whether the thing underneath SHA; the doctors, the medicine, the beds, the counties that can and can't pay for any of it, was ever built to work in the first place. It is a question that, in different clothes, runs through this whole issue.

Look at our data story on household economics. Inflation is down. The shilling has recovered. The government's numbers are, by the government's own telling, good. And yet the real-wage index tells a colder story: the average formal-sector worker is worse off in real terms than a worker was seventeen years ago. Stability and prosperity are not the same thing, and Kenyans have become fluent in telling the two apart, whatever the macro indicators say.

In politics, there appears to be a disconnect between Kenyans' ambition for good governance and attention to the politics that matter. Everyone, including the media, is focused on the 2027 formations relating to the presidential elections. Yet, we all know that since devolution became part of the governance system, local elections have as much importance as the national elections.

Look at our business piece on the proposed Nairobi Mass Rapid Transit System. This is at least the fourth serious attempt at urban rail this city has seen, and each one arrived with the same diagnosis, the same renderings, the same optimism, and none of them arrived at a train. The question worth asking of this attempt is not whether Nairobi needs it. Everyone agrees it does.



It is whether government has learned to answer the boring institutional questions; financing, land, matatu integration, political continuity, that killed the last three.

That is the pattern this issue keeps returning to: the distance between architecture and delivery. SHA registered 31 million Kenyans and owes hospitals Sh26.8 billion. Community health promoters were recruited by the tens of thousands while the country trains a tenth of the health workers it needs. Kenya announces reform readily. It struggles to make reform reach the person waiting at the till, the bed, or the bus stop.

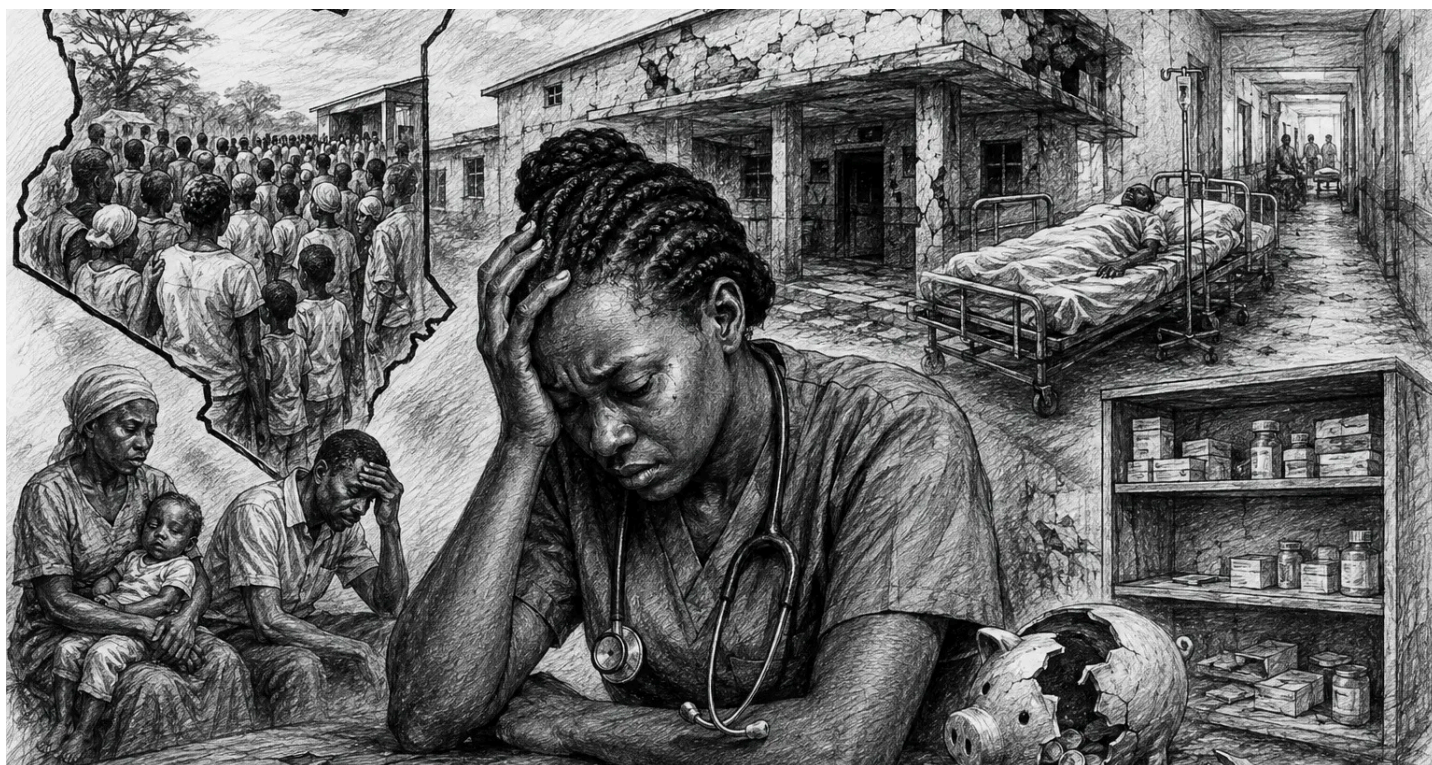
None of this is an argument for cynicism. Our health scorecard shows real gains, immunisation up, maternal mortality down, and per capita health spending more than tripled since 2022. Reform can and does produce results. But results are earned in execution, not in press briefings, and this issue is, in its way, an argument for judging governments there.

Elsewhere this week, we look at why Kenyans are discovering their own continent before they discover anyone else's, and at a High Court judge who found in a nightclub anthem more honest evidence of Kenya's relationship with cannabis than in a decade of drug policy. Both, in their own way, are about the gap between what the law and the architecture say, and what the country is actually doing.

As always, we welcome your views.

Kenya Daily Chronicle Team

Beyond SHA: The deeper sickness in Kenya's health system



For much of the past two years, Kenya's healthcare debate has been reduced to three letters: SHA.

The Social Health Authority has become the political shorthand for almost everything wrong with the system, the government's most visible reform and, depending on who is speaking, either the foundation of universal health coverage or a bureaucratic experiment that has made an already difficult system harder to navigate.

However, the intensity of the argument around SHA risks obscuring a more uncomfortable truth: Kenya's healthcare problem did not begin with the new insurance system, and it will not end with it.

Kenya is attempting to build universal healthcare atop a system that has spent years struggling with inadequate financing, uneven distribution of health workers, unreliable supplies and a dependence on households paying directly for treatment.

SHA may change how money moves through the system, but it cannot create doctors or guarantee that a patient finds the prescribed medication.

Debt at the Centre of the Debate

The clearest evidence that SHA has become a financing crisis as much as an insurance reform sits in the numbers hospitals are owed.

The Controller of Budget's reporting shows county health facilities were owed roughly Sh27 billion by SHA as of mid-2026. The consequence has been visible enough to make national news.

In November, more than 100 women were held at Mama Lucy Kibaki Hospital in Nairobi over unpaid medical bills.

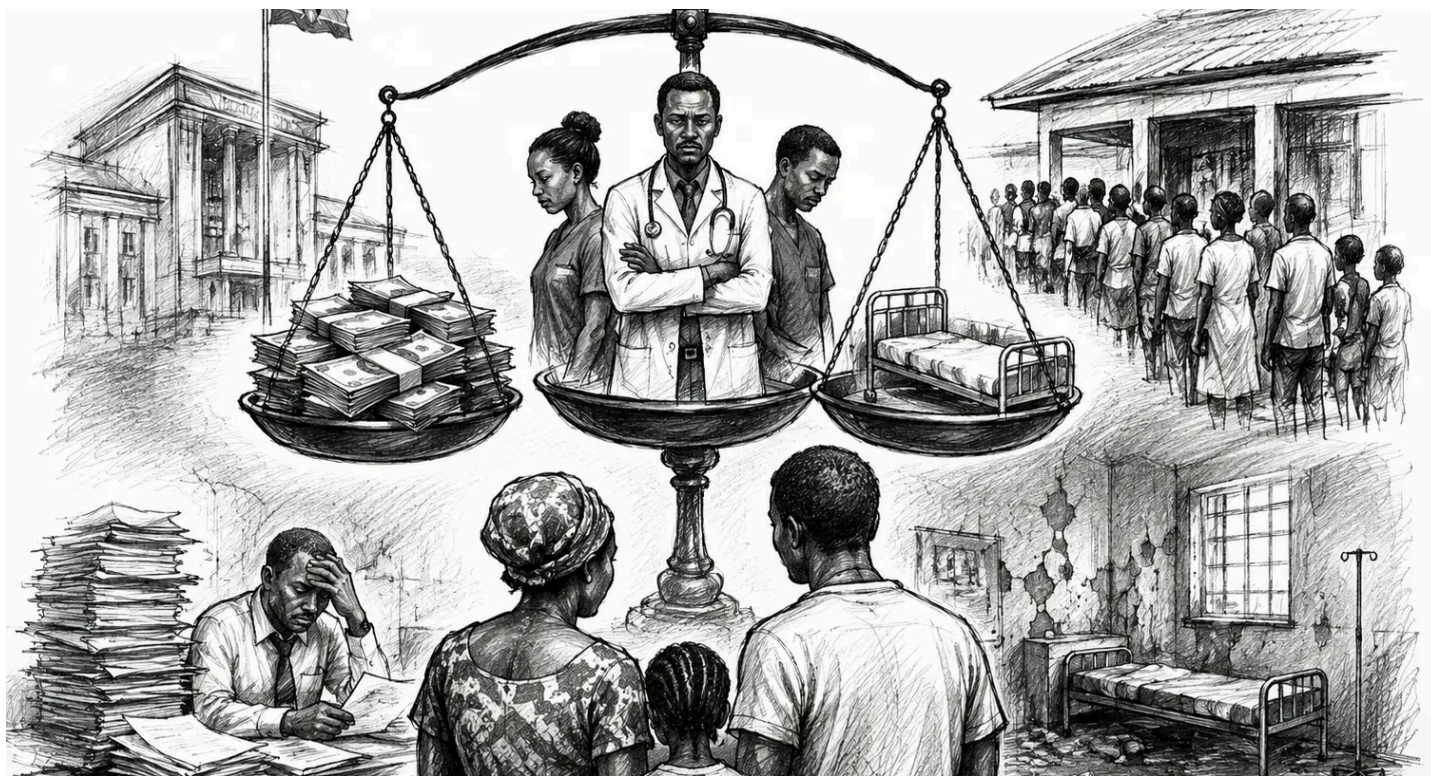
The hospital's chief executive, Frederick Obwanda, attributed the episode to low uptake of the new insurance scheme, saying hospitals were being forced to demand cash payments for sustainability.

RUPHA has been blunter still, describing the authority in one directive to its 700-plus member facilities as "a bad borrower and a bad debtor".

Homa Bay Governor Gladys Wanga told the Senate's County Public Accounts Committee in June that SHA owed her administration some Sh350 million.

The pattern is instructive: this is not simply a Nairobi story or a private-hospital story. It runs through counties of every fiscal capacity.

The government's response has been incremental, with Health Cabinet Secretary Aden Duale overseeing a phased release of funds.



Sh4 billion was released in June, for facilities owed Sh10 million or less, with the larger Sh33 billion owed to bigger providers deferred to the 2026/27 budget cycle pending "forensic verification".

SHA has since reopened a review window, giving facilities until July 31 to contest the amounts communicated for claims inherited from the defunct NHIF.

Registration ≠ Coverage

The government points, reasonably, to scale: roughly 15 million people had enrolled under SHA against a population of over 57 million, according to the 2025 Budget Policy Statement, and separate figures cited in 2026 put registered numbers above 30 million.

However, registration is not coverage, and coverage is not access.

Kenya's out-of-pocket health spending, the money households pay directly, uninsured, at the point of care, has stood at roughly a quarter of total health expenditure for over a decade, well above the 15–20 per cent ceiling the World Health Organisation treats as the threshold for adequate financial protection.

Multiple studies estimate that a meaningful share of Kenyan households still face what economists call catastrophic health expenditure: out-of-pocket costs large enough to threaten their basic consumption.

The danger, as this magazine has argued before in different contexts, is a system with universal registration but not universal access, one in which more people hold a card without the underlying service ever reaching them.

Workforce Kenya Cannot Keep

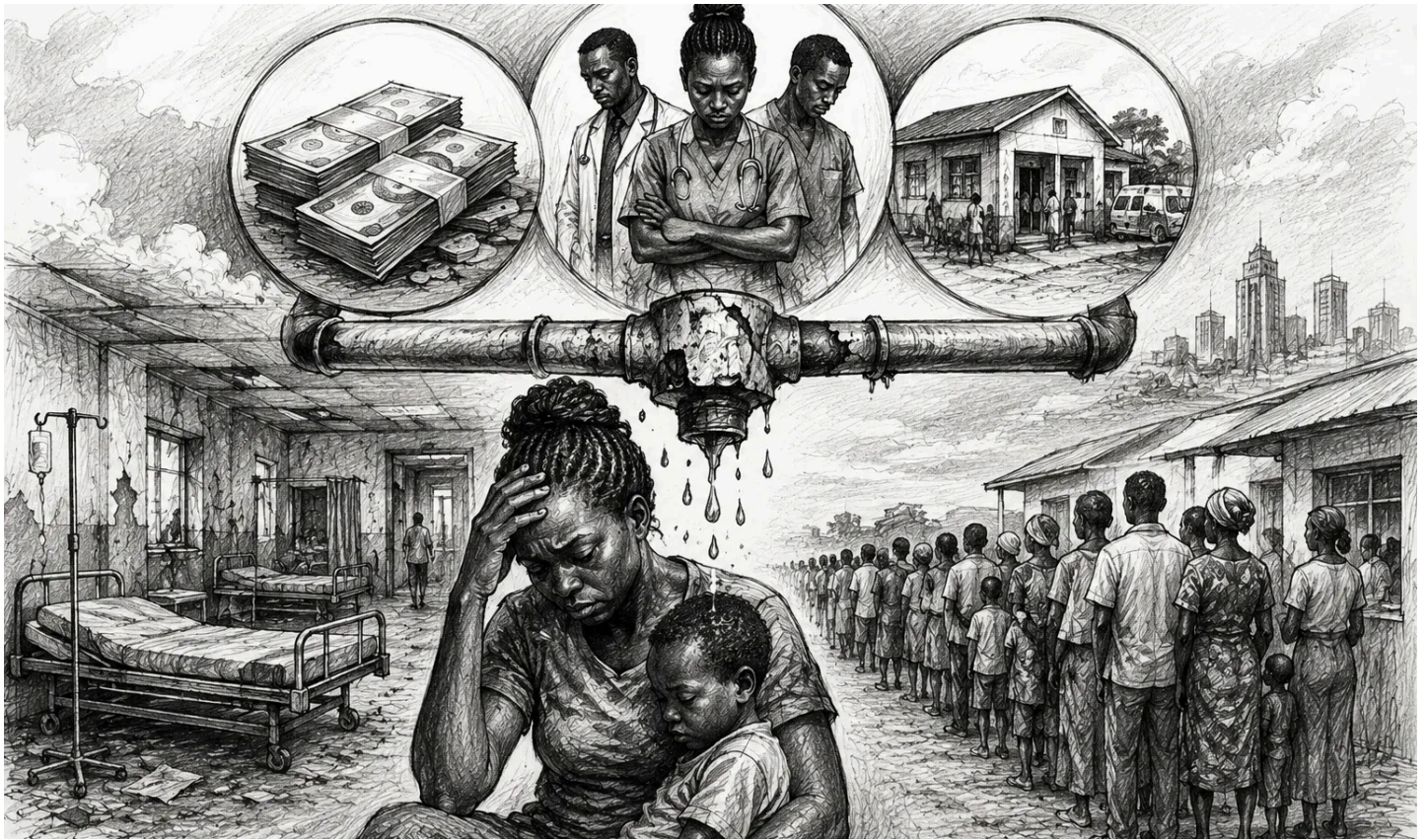
If the claims-payment crisis is SHA's most visible failure, the workforce shortage is the deeper structural one, and it long predates the current reform.

Government data cited in 2026 shows the country needs 311,060 healthcare workers nationally, but can only supply 234,140, a shortfall of 76,920 positions.

The Ministry's own modelling has projected this to grow to 114,352 by 2031 as demand for health workers rises faster than the country trains and retains them.

KMPDU secretary-general Davji Atellah has linked the shortage directly to how counties hire under devolution, noting that some counties recruit only a handful of doctors a year, even as graduates go unemployed, a mismatch he says is why many hospitals cannot deliver quality care.

The irony is sharp: Kenya trains health professionals to a standard recognised well beyond its borders, then struggles to employ the ones who stay. A pharmaceutical technologist shortage of a different kind is emerging, too.



Government data shows pharmaceutical technologists have the highest stated willingness to migrate of any cadre, at around 79 per cent, though nurses and medical officers remain somewhat more likely to stay.

Problem Devolution Didn't Solve

Devolution was supposed to bring healthcare closer to citizens, and in places it has. Counties have built facilities and hired staff in ways that would have been difficult under a fully centralised system.

But devolution also means Kenya does not have 47 versions of the same health system; it has 47 counties with radically different fiscal capacities and administrative competence.

A doctor cannot serve a patient in a facility with no equipment, no support staff and no referral infrastructure, and a hiring decision made in a well-resourced county tells us little about what is possible in a poorer one.

The SHA debt crisis has landed on this uneven terrain unevenly: a governor in Homa Bay and a hospital administrator in Nairobi are living the same national policy in different fiscal realities.

None of this means reform was wrong to attempt. NHIF model was increasingly inadequate for a population living longer, with more chronic disease, in an economy where a large informal sector makes predictable contributions difficult to collect.

Duale's acknowledgement that Kenya has lacked a comprehensive workforce policy "since independence", the basis for a proposed Healthcare Professionals' Policy in 2026, is a rare admission of a structural problem rather than a talking point. But an admission is not a result.

The government's task is to show that SHA is changing not just how healthcare is financed, but whether it is delivered, whether claims are paid on time, whether facilities stop turning away patients or detaining them over bills, and whether the counties furthest from Nairobi's fiscal advantages can hire and keep the staff that a national policy promises them.

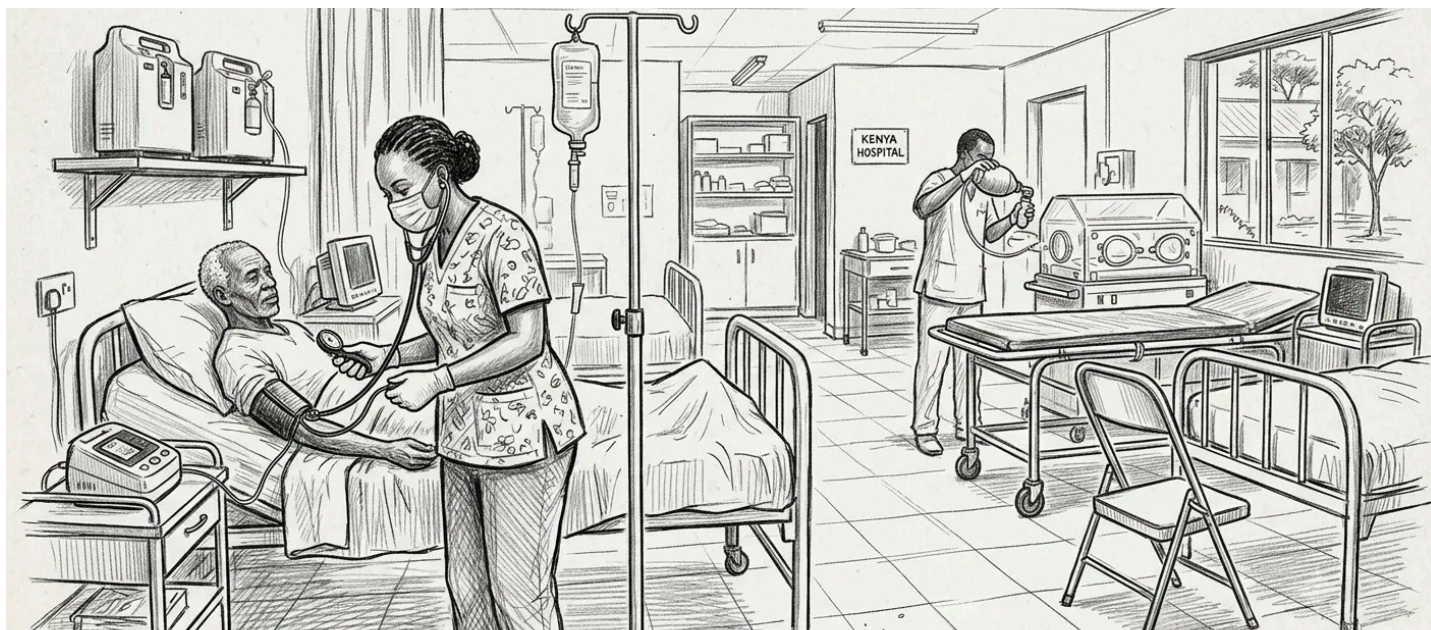
Measure That Matters

For the ordinary citizen, none of this arithmetic matters as much as one plain question: when the doctor writes a prescription, can the patient get the medicine from a facility with the staff to treat them, without the household absorbing a debt it cannot repay?

Kenya's healthcare crisis is bigger than SHA, and so is the fix.

Until claims are paid reliably, workforce policy stops being aspirational, and county capacity stops being an accident of geography, the argument over three letters will keep distracting from the larger question: whether Kenya is building a health system that works for the people it was designed to serve.

Has Kenya's health system improved?



Kenya's health debate has become consumed by the controversy surrounding the Social Health Authority, making it easy to lose sight of the larger reform project that President Ruto's administration has been attempting since taking office.

SHA is important, perhaps even central, because the financing determines what kind of health system a country can sustain. Yet the government's health agenda was never only about replacing NHIF.

It was about changing how Kenyans enter the health system, how they pay for care, how primary healthcare is organised, how medicines are procured, how medical equipment is deployed, how health information is managed and how much of the burden of illness is carried by households.

Measured against the 2022 manifesto, the Ruto administration has at least attempted to move on several of the problems it identified. The manifesto proposed a Universal Health Coverage system built around three pillars: publicly financed primary healthcare, a universal health insurance system and a national mechanism for covering chronic illnesses.

It also promised to strengthen community health, utilise technology to integrate health information, reform the NHIF, enhance the procurement of medical commodities, and find a solution to the tensions surrounding health workers and devolution.

That is a substantial agenda, and it would be intellectually dishonest to assess it only through the frustrations surrounding SHA. It would be equally dishonest, however, to assume that changing the architecture of healthcare automatically means that healthcare itself has improved.

The more useful question is neither whether the government has done nothing nor whether it has transformed the system. It is whether the reforms are beginning to produce the promised outcomes, and whether today's changes are building a health system that will work better tomorrow.

Manifesto Got The Diagnosis Largely Right

The starting point matters because the manifesto was explicit about what it believed was wrong with Kenya's healthcare system. It argued that the country was spending substantial sums on healthcare without always converting those resources into the outcomes Kenyans needed.

It identified the financial burden of illness as a major vulnerability, noting that households were still carrying a significant share of health expenditure, and illness could push families into poverty. It also recognised that Kenya's insurance model was poorly suited to a labour market where the informal wage economy represented the majority of workers.

The underlying logic of the government's reform agenda is therefore defensible: healthcare financing must become broader, primary care must become more important, and the system must do more to prevent people from reaching the point at which treatment becomes prohibitively expensive.

This is where the administration deserves credit. It did not simply preserve NHIF and attempt to make minor administrative adjustments around the edges. It chose to undertake a much more disruptive restructuring of health financing, while simultaneously trying to move the system towards primary healthcare and digital management.



That ambition should not be dismissed merely because implementation has been difficult. At the same time, the manifesto itself promised a specific UHC model that included publicly financed primary healthcare, a seamless insurance system and a national fund for chronic and catastrophic illnesses.

The government's current model is therefore not a perfect replication of what was originally promised, and the shift from manifesto language to policy reality deserves scrutiny. The question is whether the new system ultimately delivers the same objective more effectively, rather than whether it reproduces the original institutional design.

SHA: A Necessary Reform

The replacement of NHIF with SHA is the most visible and controversial part of the health agenda, but it should be assessed on two separate questions: whether reform was necessary, and whether the reform being implemented is working.

On the first question, the case for change was strong as many agree that NHIF had serious structural weaknesses, particularly its reliance on formal employment contributions in an economy where most workers are in the informal wage system.

It also highlighted the uneven distribution of insurance coverage across the country and the issue of households joining or contributing because of the way the system was designed.

The argument for reform, therefore, predates the Ruto administration and is larger than politics, but the harder question is whether SHA is solving the problems that NHIF could not.

The transition has been complicated by disputes over registration, contributions, eligibility, claims processing, provider payments and the practical experience of patients navigating the new system.

The government can explain the architecture of SHA, but a patient does not experience architecture; they experience a hospital. If a patient cannot register easily, or a hospital cannot confirm coverage, the reform feels like a failure. If a provider is not paid and becomes reluctant to accept insured patients, the reform appears like a failure.

The Bigger Story: Primary Healthcare

If SHA has dominated the political conversation, the shift towards primary healthcare may ultimately prove to be the more consequential.

The Kenya Kwanza manifesto placed community health at the centre of its proposed UHC model, arguing that prevention was more efficient than waiting for people to become seriously ill before intervening.

The administration's emphasis on community health promoters and primary healthcare is therefore one area where there is a clear line between manifesto promise and policy direction. A health system that waits until a patient requires expensive hospital treatment will always struggle with rising costs.

A health system that identifies hypertension earlier, supports maternal health closer to home, promotes immunisation, detects disease sooner and manages common conditions before they become emergencies has a better chance of improving both health outcomes and household finances.



Primary healthcare requires a functioning system behind the first point of contact. A community health promoter who identifies a patient with hypertension has achieved only half the objective if the patient cannot find the medicine required.

A health worker who identifies a high-risk pregnancy has not solved the problem if the nearest facility lacks the personnel and equipment needed when complications arise. This is why the government's primary healthcare agenda deserves credit for identifying the right direction while still requiring scrutiny over execution.

The manifesto's ambition was to make prevention the foundation of UHC. The administration's challenge is to ensure that primary healthcare does not become another programme that exists separately from the hospitals, laboratories, pharmacies, referral networks and health workers required to make it work.

Medicines Are Where Reform Becomes Real

For most Kenyans, the health system is judged less by policy documents than by what happens after a doctor writes a prescription. If the medicine is available, the system appears to be functioning, but when the patient is told to buy it from a private pharmacy, the system feels broken.

The Kenya Kwanza manifesto promised a new approach to health commodity procurement to reform the supply chain. It also identified the expansion of domestic pharmaceutical manufacturing as part of the longer-term solution.

The administration has pointed to improvements in the performance of KEMSA and the availability of essential medicines, and these improvements should be acknowledged where evident.

However, the real test is whether a patient in a county hospital can consistently obtain medication, whether facilities receive supplies on time and whether health managers can plan their inventories rather than repeatedly dealing with shortages.

Kenya has spent years investing in infrastructure and equipment, but the country has often struggled with maintenance, staffing and utilisation.

The government's equipment investments could become genuinely transformative if they reduce the need for patients to travel to Nairobi for services that can reasonably be provided closer to home.

Health Worker Problem Remains The Hardest

No health financing reform can compensate for a shortage of doctors, nurses, clinical officers, specialists and other professionals who deliver care.

The Kenya Kwanza manifesto recognised this and promised to mediate the long-running tension between health workers and county governments, acknowledging that both sides had legitimate concerns over professional development, accountability and the distribution of specialists.

Kenya's health worker problem is not simply about numbers. It is about where they work, whether they have the equipment and medicines required to practice effectively, whether they are paid on time, whether they can advance professionally and whether the country can retain the skills it has invested in developing.

The recurring disputes between health workers and the government, therefore, reflect a deeper structural problem. The government cannot build a sustainable health system while treating the people who operate it as an afterthought.



At the same time, this is not a problem that any administration can solve overnight. The more reasonable standard is whether the government is moving towards a more sustainable workforce model and whether it's creating conditions in which health workers can actually deliver better care.

Digital Health

Kenya's digital health ambitions are perhaps the least visible of its major reforms, yet they could eventually have the greatest consequences. The manifesto promised an integrated health information system that would allow Kenyans to control access to their health records and obtain information about health services through their phones.

An integrated digital health system could reduce duplication, improve continuity of care and make it easier for doctors to understand a patient's medical history. It could also improve claims management and give authorities better information about where resources are needed. But digital systems can easily create a new layer of bureaucracy.

If patients struggle to use them, if facilities lack reliable connectivity or if overstretched health workers are expected to become data-entry clerks, technology will merely digitise existing frustrations.

The County Question

The Constitution placed substantial responsibility for healthcare delivery with counties, creating the possibility of more responsive local services but also producing significant variation in capacity.

Some counties have invested heavily in health infrastructure and personnel, while others have struggled with financing, management and staffing.

The result is a country in which the quality of healthcare can still depend heavily on where a person happens to live.

The national government then faces a delicate task of supporting a national standard of healthcare without undermining the constitutional role of counties, while county governments must accept that autonomy cannot become an excuse for weak accountability.

The Kenya Kwanza manifesto recognised this tension and promised to act as an honest mediator, but the underlying challenge remains unresolved. Patients, however, do not care which level of government is responsible when they cannot find a doctor, medicine or functioning equipment.

That is why the ultimate measure of health reform must be the experience of the citizen rather than the division of constitutional responsibilities.

Mixed Scorecard

The fairest assessment of the Ruto administration's health record is neither triumph nor failure. When measured against the 2022 manifesto, the administration has acted on many of the areas it identified as requiring reform, even if the solutions adopted have not always followed the exact institutional model originally proposed.

But the government must also recognise that identifying the right problems is only the first half. The second half is making the solutions work.

This is why the administration's health legacy remains unfinished; it has changed the machinery and must now demonstrate that it can change the experience.

KENYA'S HEALTHCARE

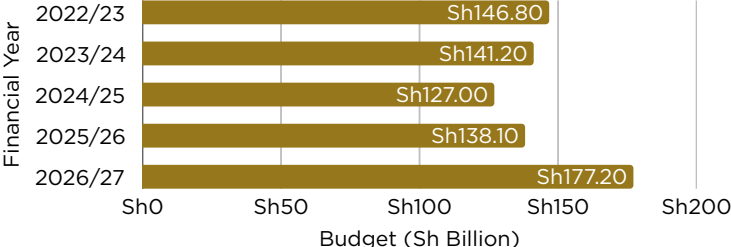
A SCORECARD

What the government says it has delivered in health since 2022 and the numbers that complicate the claim.

THE SYSTEM AT A GLANCE

**MONEY** Is Kenya spending enough on health?

HEALTH BUDGET ALLOCATION



Financial Year	Budget (Sh Billion)
2022/23	Sh146.80
2023/24	Sh141.20
2024/25	Sh127.00
2025/26	Sh138.10
2026/27	Sh177.20

PER CAPITA PUBLIC HEALTH SPENDING

Year	Spending (Sh)
2022	Sh10,940
2026	Sh35,639

**PEOPLE** Does Kenya have enough health workers?

CURRENT WORKFORCE

234,140
(75.3% of demand)

HEALTH WORKERS PER 10,000 PEOPLE

	Actual	WHO Min.
Doctors	3.2	7.7
Nurses	13.9	58.6
Clinical Officers	0.2	0.9

VACANCY RATE IN PUBLIC FACILITIES

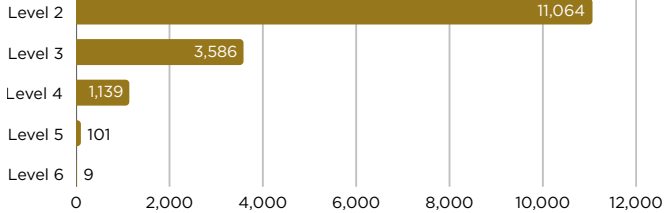
	Rate
Doctors	35%
Nurses	28%
Clinical Officers	27%

**ACCESS** Can Kenyans reach care then they need it?

POPULATION PER FACILITY

Category	Population
National Average	29,000
Rural	43,000
Urban	18,000

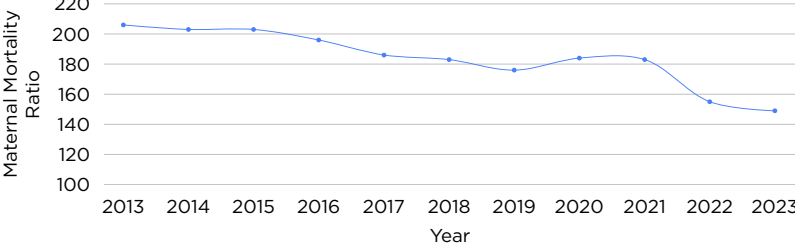
FACILITY BY LEVEL (INCLUDES 54% PRIVATE)



Level	Population
Level 2	11,064
Level 3	3,586
Level 4	1,139
Level 5	101
Level 6	9

**QUALITY** Is the care effective and safe?

MATERNAL MORTALITY RATIO
(per 100,000 live births)



Year	Ratio
2013	205
2014	202
2015	203
2016	198
2017	188
2018	185
2019	178
2020	185
2021	185
2022	155
2023	150

FULLY IMMUNISED CHILDREN
(12-23 months)

Year	Percentage
2013	67%
2017	70%
2022	80%
2025	88%

THE COUNT

31.22M

Kenyans registered under SHA (2026), up from about 8 million under the defunct NHIF in 2022

16,810

Medical interns trained under the government's internship programme

107,831

Community Health Promoters recruited, trained and placed on a Sh5,000 monthly stipend

REALITY CHECK

Sh26.8bn

Owed by SHA to county health facilities as of March 2026

114,000

Projected health-worker deficit by 2030 if training and hiring rates aren't increased

7,000

Health professionals trained annually against the global staffing norms of 70,000

Source: The National Treasury; WHO; KNBS; Kenya Population Situation Analysis Report 2025; UNICEF; Ministry of Health)

Why Kenyans feel poorer despite lower inflation, stronger economy



For much of 2025 and 2026, the government's economic messaging has rested on a series of encouraging macroeconomic indicators. Inflation has eased from the highs that followed the global commodity shocks of 2022 and 2023.

The shilling has staged one of Africa's strongest recoveries after its dramatic depreciation. Fuel prices have stabilised relative to the volatility of previous years, while foreign exchange reserves have improved, and investor confidence has shown signs of returning.

On paper, the economy appears to be finding its footing. Yet ask the average Kenyan about the economy and the response is strikingly different. By the numbers on a payslip or a shopping receipt, the economy is not improving.

Even among the formally employed, conversations increasingly revolve around side hustles, delayed investments and postponed major purchases.

The contradiction raises an important question. If the economy is improving, why do so many people feel poorer?

The answer lies in the difference between economic stabilisation and household prosperity. Governments often celebrate improvements in national indicators because they signal that an economy is becoming more resilient.

Households, however, judge the economy by a far simpler metric: whether there is more money left at the end of the month than there was a year ago. For many Kenyans, that answer remains no.

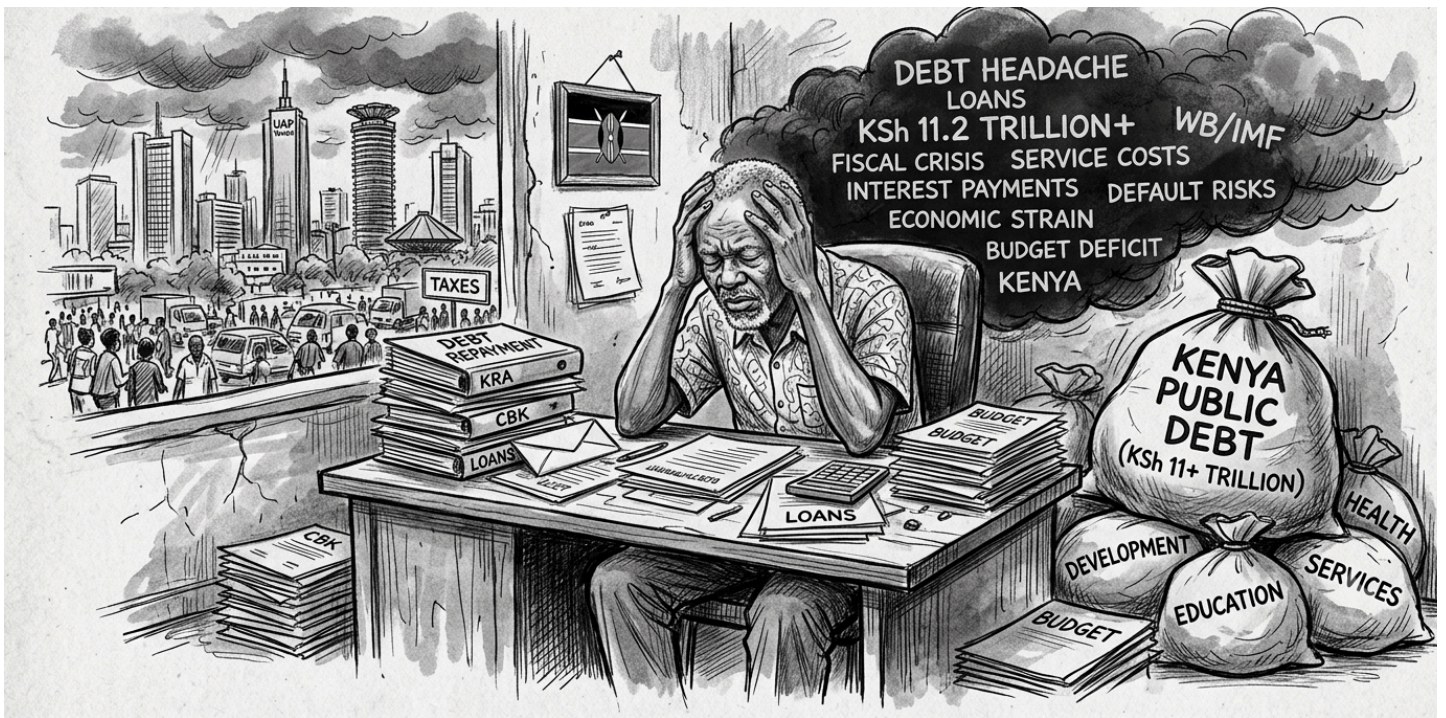
Stability Is Not the Same as Prosperity

The first explanation is that inflation measures the rate at which prices are rising, not whether prices have returned to previous levels. A loaf of bread that increased from Sh60 to Sh80 does not become cheaper simply because inflation falls.

Consumers continue paying the higher price, and unless their incomes rise proportionately, purchasing power remains diminished. Lower inflation is undoubtedly positive because it creates a more predictable environment for businesses and households alike.

However, stabilising prices after several years of sharp increases does little to repair the erosion of purchasing power that has already occurred. The cumulative effect of higher food prices, transport costs, school fees and housing expenses continues to weigh heavily on household budgets.

Compounding this challenge is the reality that wage growth has lagged behind the increase in living costs. Outside a handful of sectors, salaries have remained relatively stagnant while everyday expenses have climbed steadily.



Even households that have maintained their income levels effectively find themselves earning less in real terms because each shilling purchases fewer goods and services than it did just a few years ago.

Bury the headline growth rate and look instead at the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics' real-wage index, which is pegged to June 2009 as its baseline of 100. As of the 2026 Economic Survey, that index stands at roughly 85.84.

Stripped of jargon: the average formal-sector Kenyan worker is, in inflation-adjusted terms, poorer today than a worker was seventeen years ago. GDP per capita has climbed to a nominal \$2,714 in 2026.

Real purchasing power for the people actually drawing salaries has gone backward. Both are true at once, and the second one is closer to what people feel when they queue at the till.

There is a genuine complication worth stating honestly: the average nominal earnings per employee increased to Sh678,800 in 2025, up from Sh665,400 in 2024.

Real average earnings actually posted a growth of 2.0 per cent in 2025 due to cooling annual inflation (averaging 3.8 per cent), which reversed the 0.3 per cent decline from 2024. However, the baseline long-term index relative to 2009 remains negative due to cumulative structural inflation.

Kenya's inflation basket is not neutral across income groups, and this is where the felt experience diverges most sharply from the headline rate. Annual consumer price inflation was 6.5 per cent in July 2026, as measured by the Consumer Price Index.

This implies that the general price level was 6.5 per cent higher in July 2026 than it was in July 2025.

The price increase was primarily driven by a rise in prices of items in the Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages (9.0%); Transport (15.6%), and Housing, Water, Electricity, Gas and Other Fuels (3.2%) over the one-year period.

These three divisions together account for over 57 per cent of the total weight across the 13 major expenditure categories. followed.

These are not discretionary line items but the fixed costs of getting to work and feeding a household, and they consume a far larger share of a low or middle-income budget than of a wealthy one; even though the CPI, by design, averages across the whole population.

The Expanding Cost of Everyday Life

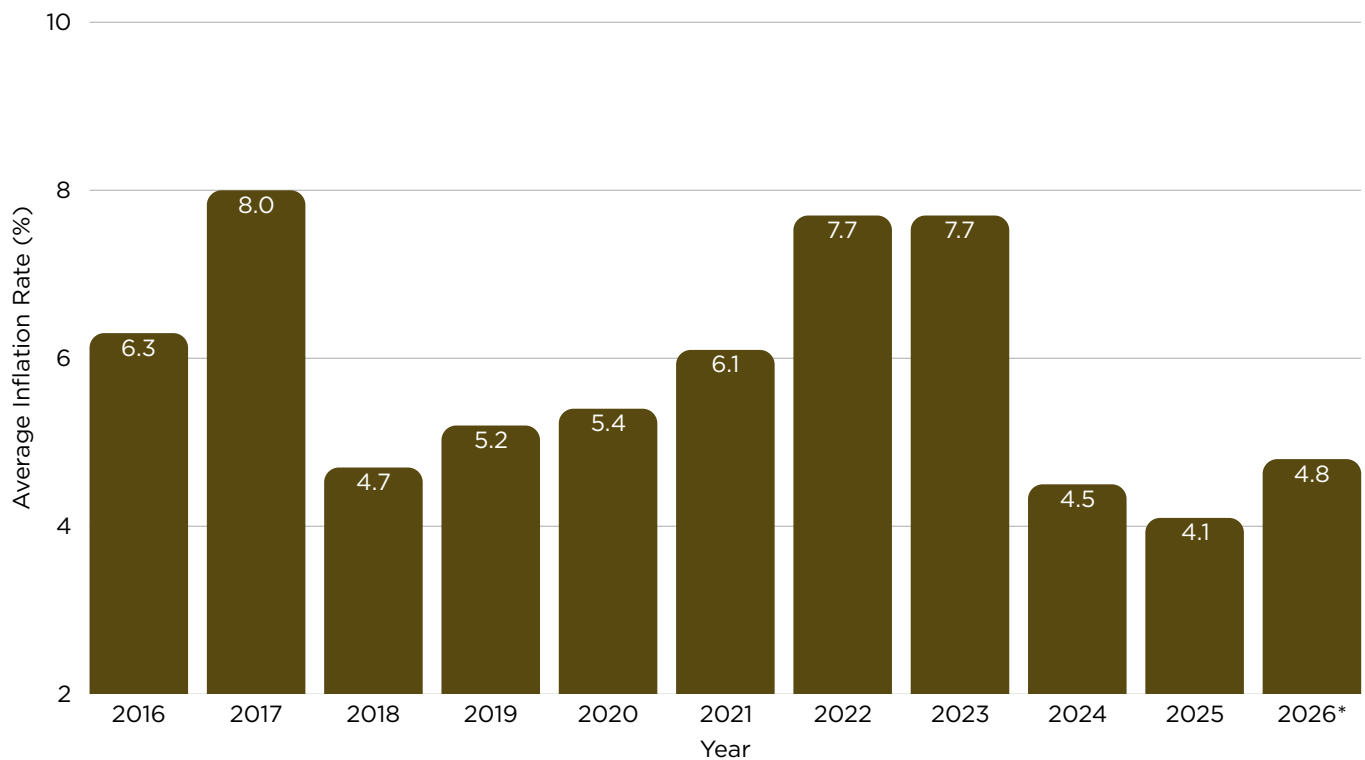
Taxation has become another defining feature of household economics. Over the past three years, new taxes and levies have expanded government revenue but have also reduced disposable income.

The Housing Levy, higher fuel VAT, increased excise duties and adjustments across various tax categories have altered how much money ultimately reaches consumers' pockets.

For many households, the issue is not any single tax but the cumulative effect of multiple deductions. Combined with rising utility costs, digital service charges, education expenses and healthcare contributions, these obligations have fundamentally reshaped monthly budgeting.

Average Annual Inflation Rate (last 10 years)

*2026 (Year to Date)



Housing presents another source of pressure. Rent continues to consume an increasing share of household income in urban centres, even as mortgage financing remains inaccessible for many middle-income earners.

Home ownership, once viewed as an achievable aspiration, feels increasingly distant for younger professionals navigating high interest rates and elevated property prices.

The result is a growing perception that financial progress requires significantly more effort than before. Income that might previously have supported modest savings or discretionary spending is now absorbed by essential expenses before the month is halfway through.

Growth Without Broad-Based Gains

Kenya's economy continues to produce areas of impressive growth. Financial technology remains vibrant, tourism has rebounded strongly, agriculture has benefited from improved weather conditions, and infrastructure investment continues across multiple sectors.

Yet these gains have not translated evenly across the labour market. Perception is not merely psychological; it influences economic behaviour.

When millions of consumers simultaneously choose to spend less, economic activity slows further, reinforcing the very anxieties that prompted caution in the first place.

Looking Beyond the Numbers

The government's emphasis on macroeconomic stability should not be dismissed. Stable exchange rates, lower inflation and improved fiscal discipline create the conditions necessary for long-term growth.

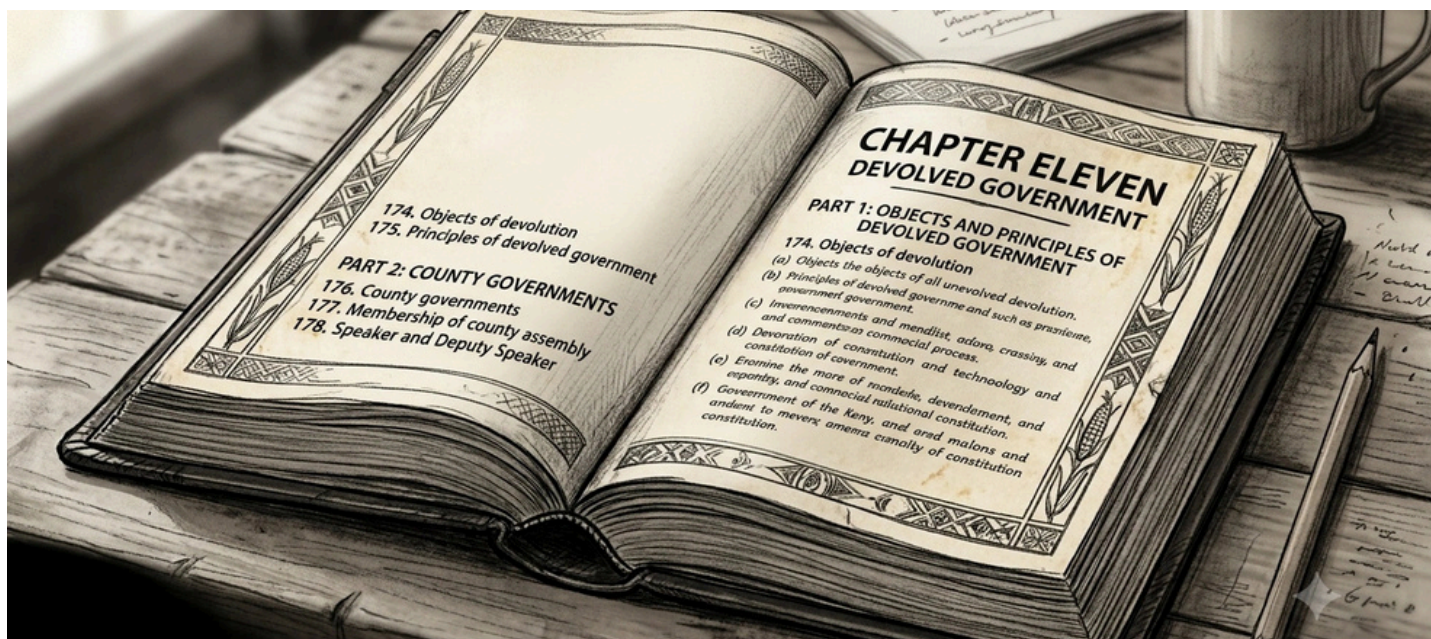
However, these achievements represent the beginning rather than the end of economic recovery.

Ultimately, households will judge success through tangible improvements in employment opportunities, rising incomes, affordable housing, accessible healthcare and greater purchasing power.

The challenge facing policymakers is therefore not simply sustaining macroeconomic stability but ensuring that growth becomes broad-based enough for ordinary Kenyans to experience it directly.

Only then will the country's improving economic indicators begin to align with how its citizens actually feel.

How national politics is eating the elections that actually run your life



If one judged Kenya solely by its political conversation today, one would conclude that there is only one election worth discussing in 2027: the presidential election.

Every headline is about who will face President Ruto. Every poll measures presidential popularity. TV debates revolve around coalition arithmetic, regional voting blocs and succession calculations. Political rallies are analysed through the prism of State House. Even conversations in matatus, barbershops and WhatsApp groups inevitably return to one question: who becomes president?

Yet there is another election taking place on the same day that will have a greater influence on how millions of Kenyans experience government over the next five years.

At the 2027 election, Governors will be elected, and County Assemblies will be constituted after MCAs, elected in the same election, assume office.

Those offices will oversee hundreds of billions of shillings in public spending, supervise hospitals, maintain county roads, regulate markets, manage agricultural extension, oversee urban planning, control waste management, and determine whether local services actually function.

In theory, devolution transformed Kenya into a country with 48 governments: one national government and 47 county governments. In practice, political attention has remained stubbornly centralised.

The paradox of Kenyan democracy is that voters obsess over the election that influences their daily lives the least while largely ignoring the elections that shape them the most.

The Politics Of Visibility

This imbalance is not entirely irrational; presidential politics has been dramatic. It has clear protagonists, simple narratives and obvious winners and losers. TV producers can fill hours discussing coalition negotiations, pollsters can produce weekly presidential rankings, and analysts can endlessly speculate about regions and ethnic arithmetic.

County politics is messier. There are 47 gubernatorial contests, 1,450 MCA races and dozens of county-specific issues that rarely lend themselves to national storytelling.

Covering county governance requires reporters to understand procurement, budgeting, health financing and local legislation. It requires sustained attention rather than episodic excitement.

National politics, by comparison, is easier as it generates conflict, personalities and spectacle. Those ingredients attract audiences, which attract advertisers, which justify further coverage. The result is a political ecosystem where media economics reinforce political centralisation.

The more national politics dominate coverage, the less space remains for examining what county governments are actually doing.



When Kenyans overwhelmingly endorsed the 2010 Constitution, they embraced one of Africa's most ambitious devolution experiments.

The logic was straightforward since too much power had accumulated in Nairobi, and development across the country was uneven. By transferring functions and funding to counties, government would move closer to citizens while creating new centres of accountability.

More than a decade later, devolution has fundamentally altered public finance. Counties collectively manage hundreds of billions of shillings annually through equitable share allocations, own-source revenue and conditional grants.

Many sectors that affect everyday life, from primary healthcare to local roads, markets, early childhood education and agricultural support, are now county responsibilities.

Yet many citizens continue evaluating governance almost exclusively through the presidency. Hospitals without medicine become "government failures" without distinguishing whether the problem lies with county procurement or national funding.

Garbage collection failures become national political talking points despite being local government responsibilities. Poor urban planning, stalled county roads or malfunctioning markets rarely become defining electoral issues for governors or MCAs. Instead, they become ammunition in broader national political battles.

The Accountability Gap

This creates one of the most significant blind spots in Kenyan democracy. Governors know they will face voters every five years. MCAs know they can be removed through elections. County executives operate within legal oversight frameworks.

But accountability depends on scrutiny. When voters spend four years discussing presidential politics while paying little attention to county budgets, procurement decisions or assembly performance, local politicians gain room to operate without sustained public pressure.

County assemblies illustrate this problem particularly well since their constitutional role is not merely legislative. They approve budgets, scrutinise executive spending, vet appointments and investigate misuse of public resources.

An effective county assembly can prevent waste, expose corruption and improve service delivery. An ineffective assembly becomes little more than an extension of the governor's office. Yet MCA elections rarely attract sustained public debate beyond personal popularity, clan dynamics or campaign patronage.

In fact, many voters cannot name their MCA's legislative record, and some even their names. Few know how their representatives voted on major county budgets, and even fewer understand committee performance or attendance records.

National political actors have little reason to change this. Presidential campaigns thrive when politics becomes an emotional contest over personalities, identity and national direction.

County performance introduces uncomfortable specifics. Questions about completed roads, functioning dispensaries, procurement transparency, stalled projects and budget absorption require evidence rather than slogans.

For governors with poor performance records, national political noise becomes politically convenient. A governor aligned with the ruling coalition can frame criticism as attacks on the president.



An opposition governor can attribute every failure to inadequate funding from Nairobi. Both narratives shift attention away from local decision-making. Instead of asking whether a governor managed county resources effectively, campaigns revolve around which presidential candidate the governor supports.

Instead of debating health outcomes, urban planning or agricultural productivity, elections become referendums on national political alliances. The governor becomes a proxy for presidential politics rather than a candidate for county leadership, and that serves politicians far better than it serves citizens.

The question is why voters often devote ten times more attention to presidential politics than to institutions responsible for many of the services they use every week.

Media's Unfinished Assignment

The media bears part of the responsibility as more often than not election coverage mirrors campaign strategy. Presidential candidates receive constant live broadcasts, coalition negotiations become breaking news and political defections dominate front pages.

Meanwhile, county reporting frequently appears only when scandal erupts. Counties will mainly make news during procurement investigations, corruption arrests, impeachment attempts and major political conflict.

Routine governance receives comparatively little sustained attention. How effectively did counties spend development funds?

Which county assemblies produced meaningful legislation? Which governors improved healthcare outcomes? Which counties expanded own-source revenue without overburdening residents? Which procurement systems delivered better value?

These stories rarely generate the same attention despite having greater long-term significance and that imbalance shapes public priorities.

Kenya may need a different hierarchy of political importance. Instead of viewing gubernatorial and MCA elections as supporting acts for the presidential race, voters could reverse the equation.

The success of devolution was never supposed to depend solely on transferring money from Nairobi, it also depended on transferring attention.

On creating citizens who followed county budgets as closely as Cabinet appointments. Who questioned governors as intensely as presidents. Who expected MCAs to legislate rather than simply mobilise crowds during campaigns.

As Kenya edges towards another election cycle, presidential politics will continue dominating headlines.

Coalitions will form and fracture, opinion polls will trend across social media, and every speech will be interpreted through the lens of 2027 arithmetic. Those stories deserve coverage.

But they should not eclipse the contests that determine whether the nearest hospital has medicine, whether county roads remain passable after the rains, whether markets receive investment, or whether local taxes produce visible public value.

The Week in Numbers

6.5%**INFLATION**

Annual consumer price inflation in July 2026, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Up from 6.4 per cent in June.

12**MEDALS**

Medals Kenya won at the 2026 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow; 3 gold, 4 silver, and 5 bronze.

Sh80.13bn**DIVIDEND**

The amount of dividend that Safaricom shareholders approved during the AGM on July 31.

Sh836m**INVESTMENT**

The value of shares that Kenyan retail investors have bought in KCB between March and June 2026.

Quote of the Week



Because we have restored stability, rebuilt investor confidence and laid a firm foundation for our economy, now is the perfect opportunity for Kenya to begin shaping the next phase of our national development,

- President William Ruto

KDC Explainer: What Is Devolution?

When Kenyans talk about government, the conversation usually begins and ends at State House. But much of what determines the quality of everyday life happens somewhere else: in county governments.

That is the basic idea behind devolution, one of the biggest changes introduced by the 2010 Constitution. Instead of concentrating political power, money and decision-making in Nairobi, the Constitution created 47 county governments with elected governors, county assemblies and their own responsibilities and budgets.

Counties are responsible for many of the services Kenyans interact with most directly. These include county health facilities, markets, local roads, waste management, water and sanitation functions, agricultural extension services, early childhood development and various local planning and regulatory functions.

County governments also manage substantial parts of the health system, making them central to whether a patient can actually access care when they need it. But counties do not operate independently of the national government.

The Constitution divides functions between the two levels of government and requires the national government to share revenue with counties.

Every year, counties receive an allocation from nationally collected revenue, while some also raise their own revenue through charges, licences, rates and other sources.

This is where devolution becomes both a governance success story and a political battleground. Counties have brought public spending and political decision-making closer to citizens, created thousands of local jobs and shifted development priorities away from Nairobi.

Yet they have also faced persistent problems, including delayed disbursements, weak procurement systems, corruption, bloated administrations and questions over whether county spending consistently translates into better services.

The biggest misconception is that devolution simply means 47 smaller national governments. It does not. Counties have defined constitutional responsibilities, while the national government retains responsibility for matters such as defence, foreign affairs, national economic policy, immigration and policing.

That distinction matters because it determines who should be held accountable when something goes wrong. A broken county road, an under-equipped dispensary or poor garbage collection may not be a State House problem. It may be a county government problem.

And that is why devolution matters ahead of the 2027 elections. Kenyans will not only be choosing a president and MPs.

They will also elect governors, MCAs and other local representatives who control decisions and resources that can have a more immediate impact on daily life.

Devolution was designed to bring government closer to the citizen. The question is whether citizens are paying close enough attention to the government that is already closest to them.

Nairobi has tried to build this railway three times before



Every major city eventually reaches a moment when building more roads stops solving its transport problems. Nairobi reached that point years ago.

The city's population has expanded far beyond what its road network was designed to accommodate, suburban growth has stretched commuting distances, and economic activity has become increasingly concentrated in a few corridors that experience crippling congestion every morning and evening.

The result is a transport system that imposes enormous costs on businesses, households and government alike through lost productivity, higher logistics costs, pollution and declining quality of life.

Against that backdrop, the proposed Nairobi Mass Rapid Transit System represents one of the most consequential infrastructure decisions Kenya could make over the next decade.

The proposal, recently presented to the Nairobi County Cabinet and the President, envisions an integrated transport system that combines rail, bus rapid transit and coordinated land-use planning rather than treating each mode of transport as a separate project.

It recognises that successful cities do not simply build transport infrastructure; they organise urban growth around efficient mobility networks.

That ambition deserves serious consideration because Nairobi undoubtedly needs a modern mass transit system. Yet support for the project should not mean suspending scrutiny.

The Cabinet should ask harder questions than previous governments have asked, not because Kenya should hesitate to build urban rail, but because Nairobi has already spent decades pursuing versions of the same dream without ever laying the foundations for lasting success.

Nairobi Has Been Here Before

The promise of a modern urban railway is hardly new. Successive governments have announced plans to transform Nairobi's transport system, often accompanied by impressive feasibility studies, colourful renderings and ambitious completion dates.

Each proposal emerged from the same diagnosis that the city's dependence on roads and matatus alone would eventually become unsustainable. Each also generated optimism that Nairobi was finally on the verge of joining the ranks of major cities served by efficient mass transit.

Yet none of those plans reached completion. Political priorities shifted, financing became uncertain, institutions failed to coordinate, or projects simply lost momentum as governments turned their attention elsewhere.



The consequence is that Nairobi continues to wrestle with many of the same transport challenges that motivated those earlier proposals, only on a much larger scale as the city's population and economy have continued to grow.

There are, however, important reasons to believe this proposal could be different.

Unlike many previous attempts that viewed rail primarily as a transport engineering project, the current vision places greater emphasis on integrating transport with urban planning.

The presentation links mobility planning directly with land-use policy along major corridors, recognising that transport infrastructure influences where people live, where businesses invest and how cities expand over time.

That distinction matters because successful transport systems are rarely built in isolation. Around the world, cities that have transformed mobility have done so by treating rail stations as catalysts for housing, commercial development and public services.

Transport becomes not merely a means of moving people but the framework around which economic growth is organised. If Nairobi embraces that broader philosophy, the project could generate benefits that extend far beyond reducing traffic congestion.

The Case for Building It

The economic argument for mass transit is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Every hour that commuters spend trapped in traffic represents time that could have been used productively.

Businesses absorb higher transport costs, workers experience longer and more exhausting journeys, while investors increasingly factor urban mobility into decisions about where to locate operations.

Congestion is no longer simply an inconvenience. It has become a constraint on Nairobi's competitiveness as East Africa's commercial capital

Building more roads alone cannot solve that problem indefinitely. Experience from cities across the world shows that additional road capacity often attracts additional traffic until congestion eventually returns.

Rail and other forms of high-capacity public transport offer something roads cannot easily provide: the ability to move significantly larger numbers of people within the same transport corridor while using far less urban space.

The proposal also highlights another dimension that deserves greater public attention. Transport is increasingly a public health issue. The presentation draws attention to pollution hotspots along major corridors such as Thika Road and Ngong Road, illustrating how traffic density and surrounding land use contribute to deteriorating air quality across parts of Nairobi.

Reducing dependence on private vehicles and improving public transport therefore offers benefits that extend beyond shorter travel times to include cleaner air and healthier urban environments.

A successful mass transit system could also reshape Nairobi's economy in profound ways. Reliable public transport expands labour markets by allowing workers to access jobs further from home without prohibitive commuting costs.



Businesses gain access to a larger workforce, property development becomes more predictable around transport corridors, and investment follows the certainty that efficient mobility creates.

Cities such as London, Singapore and Addis Ababa demonstrate that transport infrastructure can become an engine for urban transformation rather than merely a response to congestion.

Cabinet Must Ask Better Questions

Supporting the railway should not mean approving it uncritically. If previous proposals failed despite widespread agreement that Nairobi needed better transport, then the critical issue has never been whether the railway is desirable.

It has always been whether government has adequately prepared for the institutional, financial and governance challenges that determine whether projects succeed or fail.

Cabinet should therefore insist on convincing answers before construction begins.

How will the project be financed without imposing unsustainable fiscal pressure? Which institutions will ultimately own, regulate and operate the system?

How will the existing matatu industry, which carries millions of passengers every day and provides livelihoods for thousands of Kenyans, be integrated into the new transport ecosystem rather than simply displaced?

What mechanisms will ensure transparent land acquisition and minimise costly legal disputes?

Perhaps most importantly, what guarantees exist that the project will survive changes in political leadership and remain a national priority over the decade or more required for implementation?

These are not questions designed to delay progress. They are precisely the questions that should have been answered during previous attempts.

Kenya has reached a point where postponing mass transit carries its own costs. Nairobi's economy continues to expand, its population continues to grow and congestion continues to erode productivity.

The city cannot build enough roads to accommodate that growth indefinitely, nor can it rely forever on a transport system that struggles to meet the demands of a modern metropolitan economy.

That is why this proposal deserves support. It also deserves rigorous scrutiny.

If government has genuinely learned from decades of abandoned plans, Nairobi could finally deliver the integrated transport system the city has needed for generations.

If those lessons have not been learned, however, another ambitious proposal risks becoming another chapter in a familiar story of unrealised promises.

Cabinet should therefore ask harder questions this time, not because Nairobi should be reluctant to build the railway, but because the city has waited far too long to get it right.

More Kenyans are travelling across Africa. What is changing?



For decades, the idea of international travel among many Kenyans was shaped by geography as much as aspiration. Europe represented history and prestige, the Middle East symbolised luxury and shopping, while Asia promised affordability and adventure.

Africa, despite being home, often occupied an unexpected blind spot. It was a continent people crossed for business, family visits or official assignments rather than for leisure. That hierarchy is beginning to change.

Today, Nairobi's airports tell a different story. Weekend flights to Kigali are filled with young professionals escaping for a long weekend. Zanzibar has become a favourite destination for honeymooners and groups of friends seeking white sandy beaches without the complications of long-haul travel.

Cape Town consistently features on the bucket lists of Kenyan travellers looking for food, wine and outdoor adventure, while Accra, Addis Ababa and Windhoek are increasingly appearing on travel itineraries shared across social media.

The rise of intra-African travel reflects more than changing holiday preferences. It signals a broader shift in how a growing African middle class views the continent, not as a collection of disconnected countries, but as a network of accessible destinations linked by business, culture and increasingly convenient transport.

As African economies become more interconnected, tourism is quietly becoming one of the most visible expressions of continental integration.

The Continent Is Becoming Easier to Explore

One of the biggest drivers of this shift has been improved connectivity. A decade ago, travelling between African cities often meant flying through Europe or the Middle East, turning relatively short journeys into expensive and time-consuming itineraries.

While gaps remain, expanded airline networks have made regional travel considerably easier. Nairobi now enjoys direct connections to dozens of African capitals, while regional carriers have increased competition on key routes, gradually making fares more accessible for leisure travellers.

Visa policies have also evolved. Several African countries have introduced visa-free or visa-on-arrival arrangements for Kenyan passport holders, reducing one of the biggest psychological and administrative barriers to regional travel. Digital visa systems have further simplified the process, making spontaneous weekend trips increasingly feasible.

These improvements have coincided with a broader push for continental integration under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which seeks to encourage not only trade but also greater movement of people, ideas and investment. Tourism has become an important beneficiary of that agenda.



The result is that destinations once perceived as distant or difficult to reach now feel like realistic options for a four-day holiday.

Experience Is Replacing Prestige

Changing travel patterns also reflect changing values. For previous generations, international travel often carried symbolic importance. Visiting London, Paris or New York represented personal achievement and social status.

Today's younger travellers are motivated by different priorities. They increasingly seek experiences rather than destinations that simply carry prestige. Social media has accelerated this shift by exposing travellers to places that were previously overlooked.

Instead of asking where everyone else has been, many now ask what unique experience a destination offers. Kigali's clean streets, thriving coffee culture and contemporary art scene appeal to travellers looking for a modern African city. Zanzibar combines centuries of Swahili history with some of the continent's most celebrated beaches.

Cape Town offers hiking, vineyards and world-class cuisine within a single destination, while Accra has established itself as one of Africa's leading cultural capitals through music, fashion and heritage tourism.

These destinations also provide experiences that feel culturally familiar while still offering a sense of discovery. Shared histories, similar cuisines and common social customs allow travellers to immerse themselves more quickly than they might in destinations with greater cultural and linguistic barriers.

The appeal is not simply affordability, although that remains an important consideration. It is the growing recognition that some of the world's most compelling travel experiences can be found much closer to home.

The African Middle Class Is Driving Tourism

Perhaps the most significant change is who is travelling. Africa's tourism industry has historically depended heavily on visitors from Europe, North America and Asia. Increasingly, however, Africans themselves are becoming one of the sector's fastest-growing markets.

A growing middle class, rising disposable incomes, digital booking platforms and more flexible work arrangements have combined to create a generation that sees travel as an essential part of modern life rather than an occasional luxury.

Weekend breaks, wellness retreats, culinary tourism and adventure travel are becoming more common among young professionals, entrepreneurs and dual-income households.

For many, travel has also become an extension of personal identity. Experiences are documented through Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, where recommendations from fellow African travellers often carry greater influence than traditional travel advertising.

This has encouraged destinations to market themselves directly to regional audiences rather than relying exclusively on long-haul visitors. Hotels, airlines and tourism boards are beginning to respond.



Promotional campaigns increasingly feature African travellers, while hospitality providers are designing packages tailored to shorter regional holidays rather than lengthy overseas vacations.

Beyond Tourism

The implications extend far beyond leisure. Every flight between Nairobi and another African city carries not only holidaymakers but also entrepreneurs, students, investors, creatives and professionals building relationships across borders.

Tourism frequently becomes the gateway to broader economic engagement, introducing visitors to markets they later revisit for business or investment. Creative industries benefit from these exchanges as well.

Travellers return home with new perspectives on fashion, architecture, food, music and design, contributing to a richer cultural dialogue across the continent. Restaurants experiment with regional cuisines, entrepreneurs identify new business ideas and artists build collaborations that would have been unlikely without increased mobility.

This growing movement of people is gradually reshaping how Africans understand one another. Rather than viewing neighbouring countries through headlines or stereotypes, travellers increasingly experience them firsthand, discovering both their diversity and their shared aspirations.

Kenya's Opportunity

For Kenya, the growth of intra-African tourism presents both an opportunity and a challenge.

The country remains one of Africa's most recognisable tourism brands, thanks to its wildlife, coastline and global reputation in hospitality. Yet competition is intensifying as more destinations invest aggressively in infrastructure, visitor experiences and destination marketing.

Rwanda has successfully positioned Kigali as one of Africa's cleanest and most business-friendly cities. South Africa continues to dominate premium leisure tourism, while Zanzibar has become synonymous with tropical beach holidays.

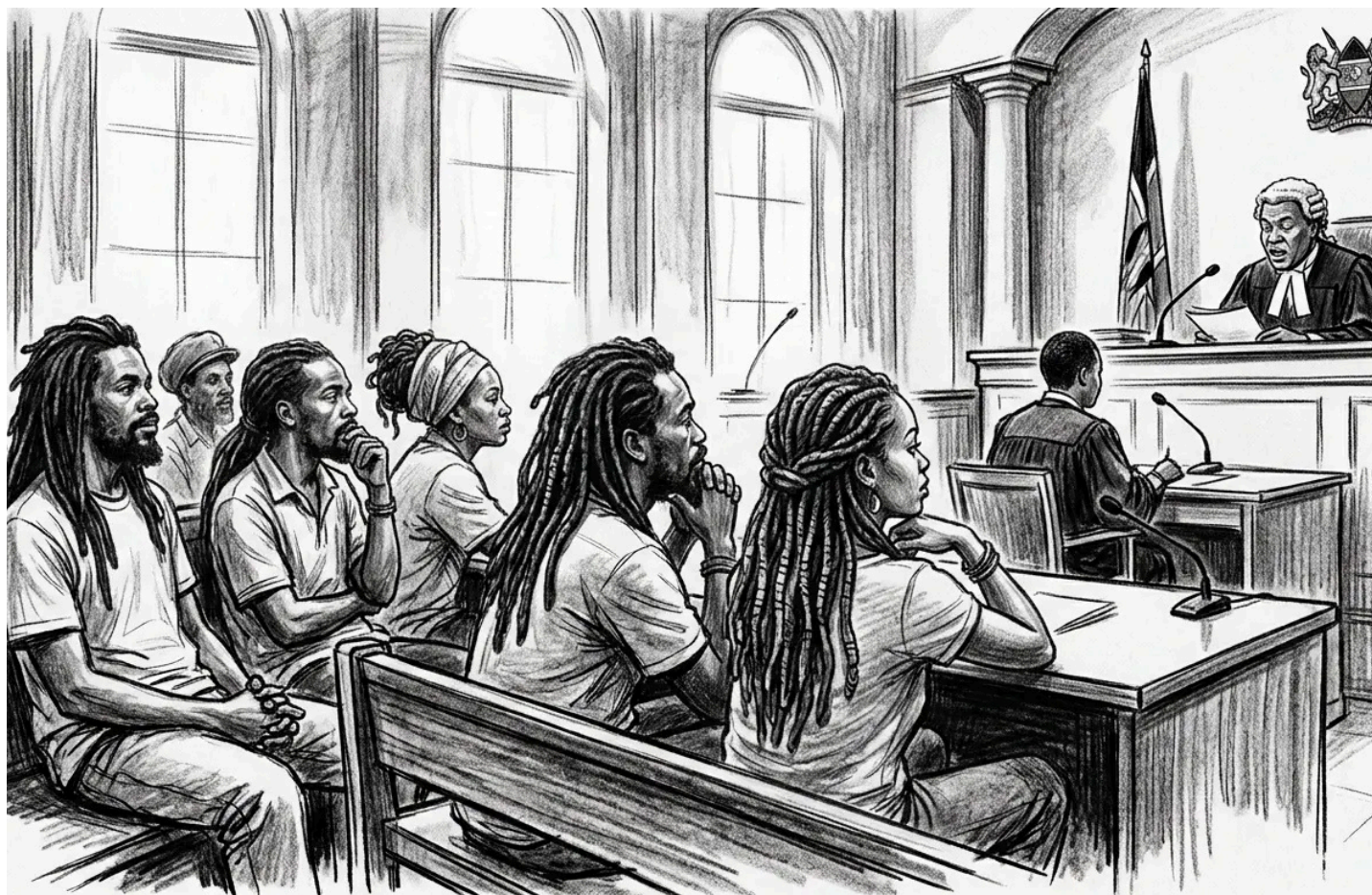
Maintaining Kenya's competitive edge will require more than relying on established attractions. Investment in domestic transport, urban experiences, cultural tourism, sports tourism and conference infrastructure will become increasingly important as regional travellers seek destinations that offer variety alongside convenience.

The opportunity is significant because Africa's next tourism boom may not be driven primarily by visitors from Europe or North America. It may instead be powered by Africans themselves.

The Kenyan traveller is already becoming more confident about exploring the continent, discovering that remarkable experiences often lie only a short flight away.

As connectivity improves and borders become easier to cross, travelling within Africa is likely to become not the alternative to overseas holidays, but the first choice for a generation that increasingly sees the continent not as a collection of separate destinations but as one vast neighbourhood waiting to be explored.

A hit song about ‘Bangi’ found its way into a High Court judgment



When Justice Bahati Mwamuye sat down to write his ruling on the Rastafari Society of Kenya's bid to legalise cannabis for religious use, he reached for an unlikely legal authority: a party anthem by a Kenyan band called Just Imagine Africa.

The song, titled “Bangi”, a Swahili word for marijuana, opens with lyrics that might seem more at home in a nightclub than a courtroom:

“Ukiamka kwenda Church, mi huamka kuvuta bangi; Mi huvuta bangi ndio ni deal na mashetani...”
(When you wake up to go to church, I wake up to smoke cannabis; I smoke cannabis to deal with devils.)

But for Justice Mwamuye, these words were not just catchy lines; they were cultural evidence of a profound disconnect between Kenya's cannabis laws and the country's social reality.

Cultural Context Of The Song

Just Imagine Africa is a Kenyan Afro-fusion, pop and reggae band fronted by the late Michael Mugo, who served as lead vocalist, songwriter and rhythm guitarist.

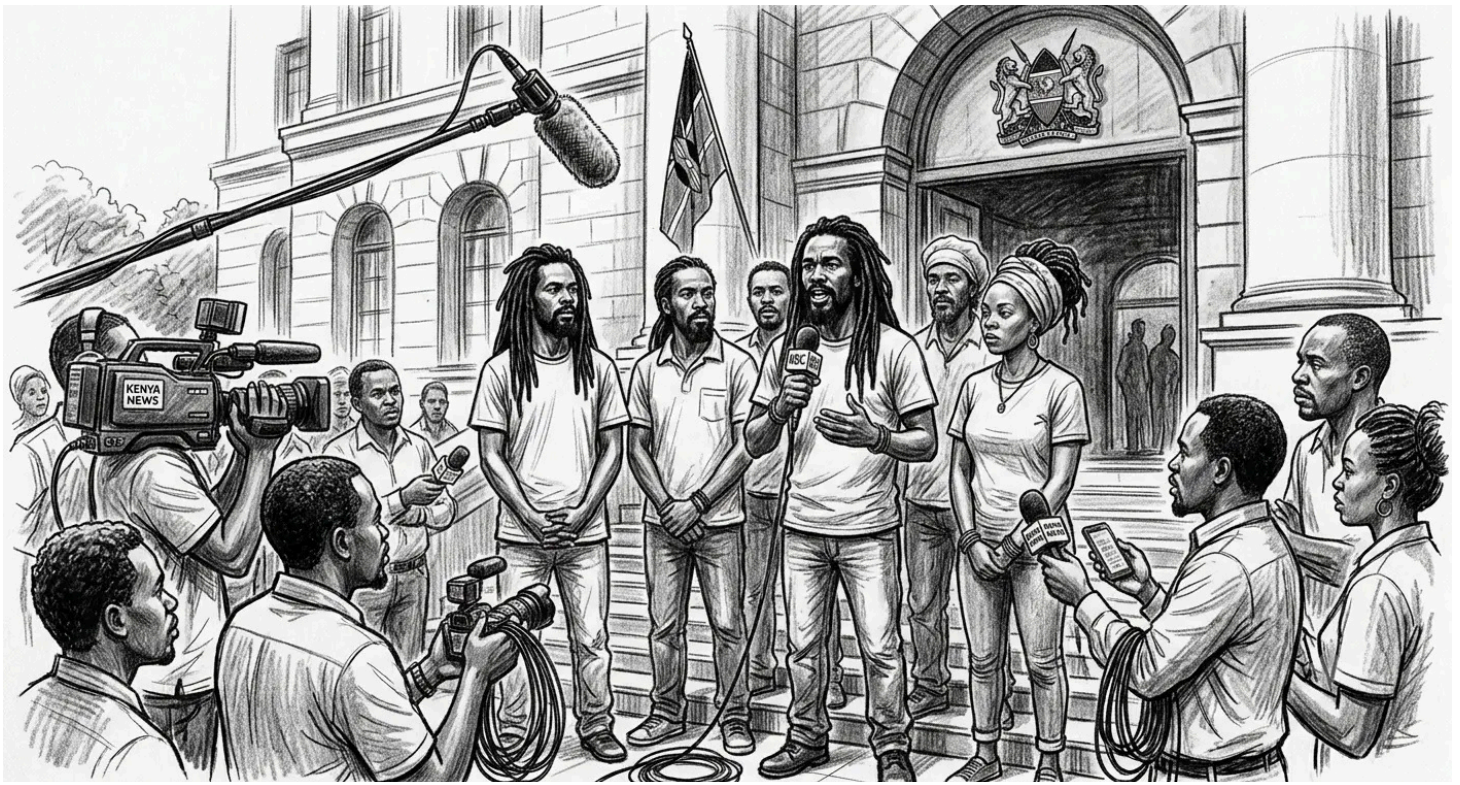
The group, which also includes members Daniel Mbithi, Dominic Juma, Wambui Ng'ang'a, Arlon Mwangi, Brian Joseph, Joel Djowa and Marlon Aduvaga, had already built a following with hits like Mumbi, Madame Wa Kenya and Like Heaven. Then came Bangi.

Released in early 2020, the track was described as a “comical and creative tune” that openly discussed marijuana use and the need to legalise it. Mugo conveyed that cannabis helped him deal with the daily challenges of an average Kenyan youth, and his message resonated widely. The music video amassed over 800,000 views on YouTube.

The song marked a significant milestone as one of the first mainstream Kenyan tracks to glorify marijuana, sparking active discussions about why its use remained illegal. Tragically, Mugo passed away in September 2023.

The Rastafari Society's Petition

The Rastafari Society of Kenya filed its petition in 2021, seeking a constitutional exemption allowing members to cultivate, possess and use cannabis privately as a religious sacrament.



They argued that cannabis was a “holy herb” used to achieve “cosmic consciousness” and a connection with “JAH” – and that the ban infringed on their constitutional rights to freedom of religion.

Justice Mwamuye, when delivering his judgment on July 15, 2026, described the band’s work as part of a “veritable ocean of cultural expressions” that positions cannabis as a means for spiritual peace and enlightenment.

The judge also cited Peter Tosh’s 1976 anthem “Legalise it” using the lyrics, “Singers smoke it; And players of instruments too... Doctors smoke it; Nurses smoke it; Judges smoke it; Even Lawyers too”.

The judge observed that Kenya is “awash with cultural expressions”^{**} of cannabis use, from hit songs to imagery and text on matatus (ngangyas).

He noted that the “shock effect” of being associated with cannabis had diminished, with many prominent Kenyan personalities openly admitting to past or present use.

He also pointed to the open sale of cannabis-derived products, including “weed cookies”, in mainstream shops and supermarkets as evidence of the drug’s normalisation.

Reasons For The Court’s Dismissal

Despite this cultural acknowledgement, Justice Mwamuye ultimately dismissed the petition. He gave several reasons:

The petitioners had not pursued licensing mechanisms already available under Kenya’s Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Control) Act before turning to the courts.

He pointed out that witness testimony was inconsistent. Some adherents acknowledged that Rastafarians could worship without cannabis and that some members never used it at all.

The judge concluded that cannabis appeared to be a “preferred mode of worship” rather than a mandatory doctrinal requirement.

The petitioners had failed to provide a concrete plan for how a religious exemption would be regulated.

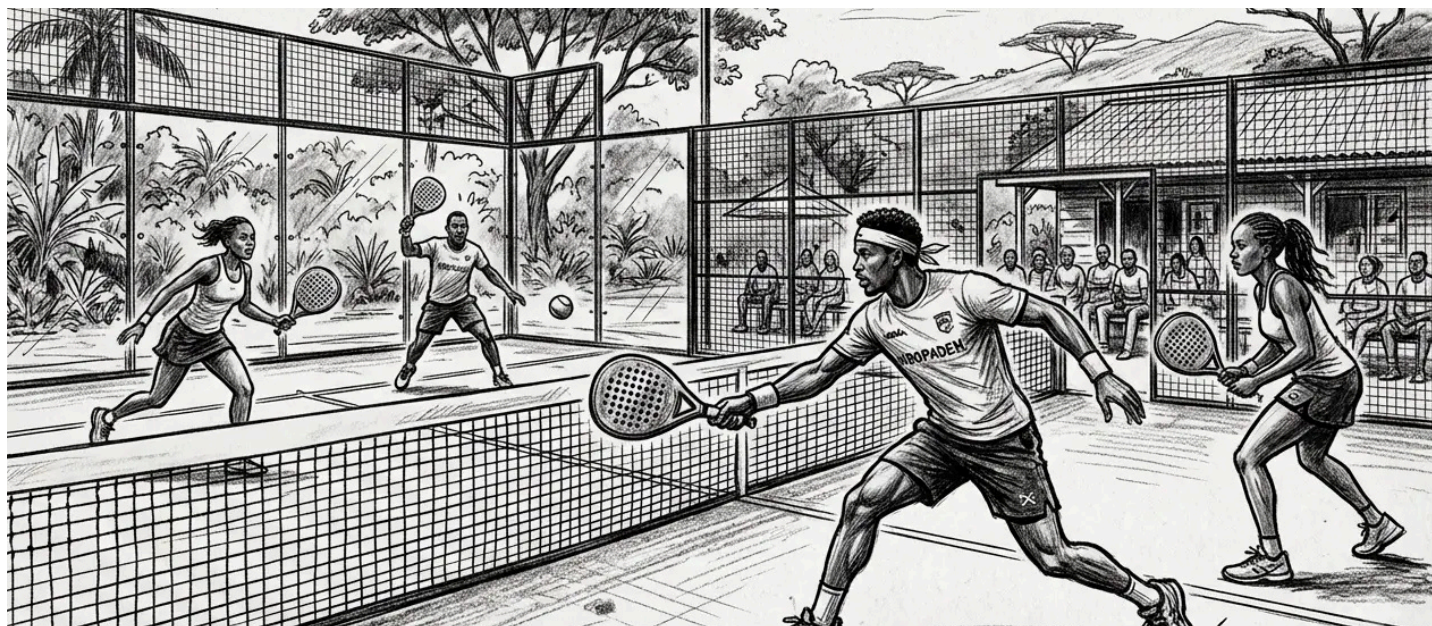
Any limitation on religious freedom was reasonable and justifiable under Article 24 of the Constitution to protect public health and safety, with the court citing evidence from NACADA on the risks of cannabis, including dependency, cognitive impairment and mental health disorders.

But the judge was careful to clarify that his remarks were not an endorsement of legalisation.

“This is not to excuse cannabis use or to argue that it should be legalised merely because ‘the war is lost,’” he said.

Instead, he posed a broader policy question: “Do we now need to have a national social conversation, outside of courts and legislative houses, on what do we now do with this phenomenon in light of what it has become in our society?”

Weekend Warriors: How amateur sport is reshaping urban Kenya



On a typical Saturday morning in Nairobi, the city wakes up in two very different ways. One half is still asleep after a demanding workweek. The other has already logged five kilometres before sunrise.

In Karura Forest, groups of runners snake through shaded trails wearing matching club jerseys and smart watches that record every heartbeat. Along Limuru Road and the Northern Bypass, cyclists in colourful kits glide through the morning mist before gathering at cafés for coffee and breakfast.

Across the city, five-a-side football pitches are fully booked before nine o'clock, while padel courts in Westlands, Kilimani and Karen host doubles matches between lawyers, entrepreneurs, bankers and university students.

Elsewhere, yoga studios, boxing gyms and functional fitness centres welcome participants looking for something more engaging than another hour on a treadmill.

Few of these people have ambitions of representing Kenya at the Olympics, and most are not chasing prize money or professional contracts. Yet together they represent one of the most significant, and least discussed, shifts in Kenya's urban culture over the past decade.

For generations, Kenya's sporting identity has been defined almost exclusively by elite performance. The country celebrates Olympic champions, marathon world record holders and international rugby stars because they project national pride globally.

Recreational sport, by contrast, has rarely attracted the same attention. It was something people did in school, occasionally at work, or informally in neighbourhoods before adulthood and professional responsibilities took over.

Across Nairobi and increasingly in cities such as Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru and Eldoret, sport is becoming a lifestyle rather than a profession.

Thousands of urban residents now organise their weekends around races, cycling rides, hikes and social leagues, treating exercise not as an obligation but as an essential part of modern life.

The transformation reflects changing attitudes towards health and wellbeing, but it also signals something much larger.

Amateur sport is emerging as a new social institution, a growing economic sector and an important indicator of how Kenya's middle class is redefining community.

More Than Exercise

The expansion of recreational sport mirrors broader social changes taking place in Kenya's cities.

Urban professionals are working longer hours than previous generations, commuting through increasingly congested roads and spending much of their day behind computer screens.



At the same time, digital technology has changed how people interact. Friendships are maintained through messaging apps, meetings happen on video calls and entertainment is increasingly consumed alone through personal devices.

Against that backdrop, organised sport offers something increasingly rare: genuine human connection built around a shared experience. Running clubs perhaps illustrate this evolution better than any other activity.

What once consisted of a handful of athletes preparing for road races has become a thriving network of communities that welcome everyone from complete beginners to experienced marathoners.

Groups such as We Run Nairobi, Urban Swaras Running Club and Karura Running Club regularly attract hundreds of participants who gather not only to train but also to socialise, mentor one another and build lasting friendships. Weekend runs often conclude with coffee, breakfast or networking sessions that are as important as the kilometres covered.

The appeal extends well beyond running. Cycling clubs have multiplied across major urban centres, organising rides that combine endurance with exploration. Hiking groups fill buses every weekend bound for destinations such as Ngong Hills, Mount Longonot and the Aberdares.

Yoga studios now cater to professionals seeking mindfulness alongside physical fitness, while sports such as padel and pickleball have introduced entirely new communities to Kenya's recreational landscape.

The diversity of activities reflects the growing maturity of Kenya's sporting ecosystem. According to a 2026 assessment by Sport for Development, Kenya now has an estimated 125 registered national sports federations and associations, covering disciplines that range from athletics and football to climbing, rowing, triathlon and emerging racquet sports.

The same report notes that participation in recreational activities such as running, cycling, gym fitness, yoga and hiking is expanding particularly quickly among younger urban adults, suggesting that organised exercise is no longer a niche pursuit but an increasingly mainstream lifestyle choice.

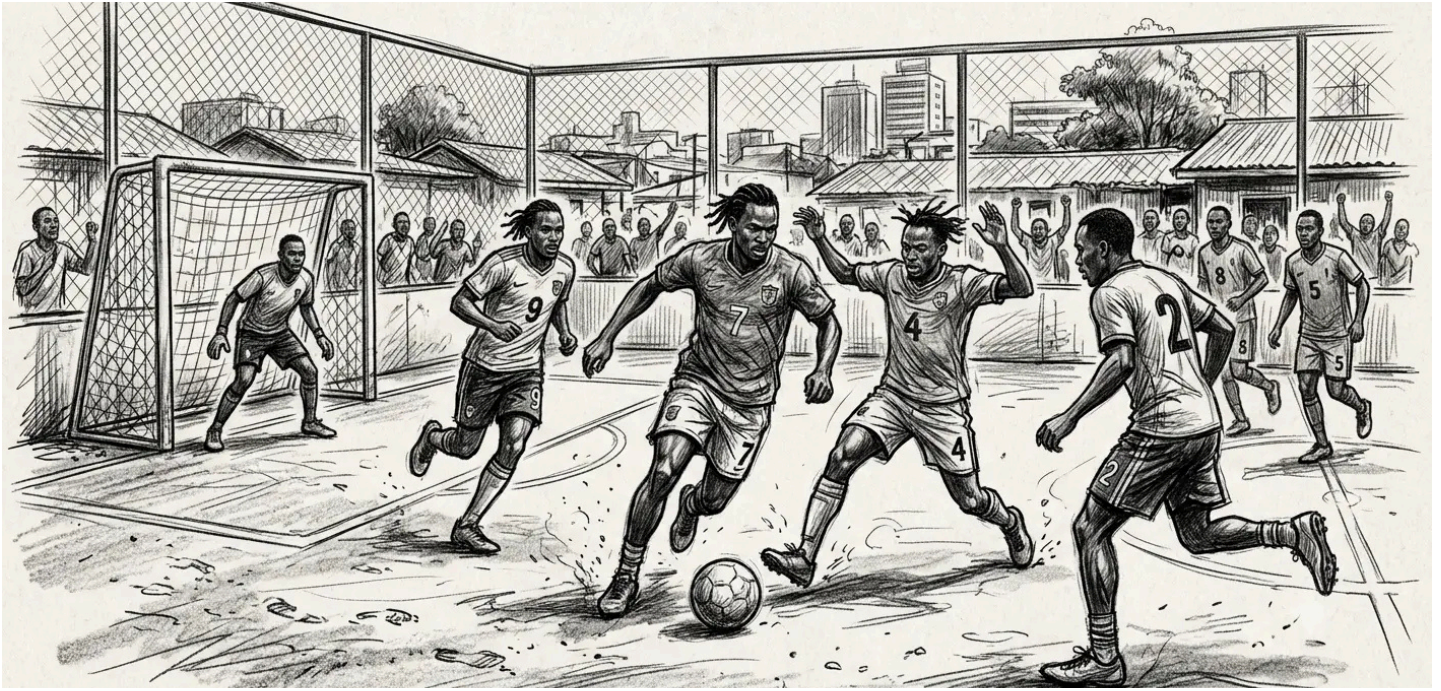
That change is significant because it marks a departure from the traditional understanding of sport as competition. For many urban Kenyans, success is no longer measured by winning medals or setting records.

It is measured by completing a first 10-kilometre race, reaching a personal fitness goal or simply showing up consistently every weekend. Participation itself has become the achievement.

Building Communities Beyond the Workplace

The popularity of amateur sport cannot be explained by fitness alone. If exercise were the only motivation, treadmills would have solved the problem years ago.

Instead, people continue seeking organised group activities because they provide something that modern urban life increasingly struggles to offer: a sense of belonging.



Kenya's cities have grown rapidly over the past two decades, bringing opportunities but also greater social fragmentation. Young professionals frequently move away from their hometowns for work, traditional neighbourhood ties have weakened and hybrid working arrangements have reduced the daily interactions once provided by the office.

Recreational sport has stepped into that gap by creating new forms of community built around shared interests rather than geography or profession.

Running clubs have become perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon. New members often join hoping to improve their fitness but remain because they discover friendships, mentorship and support networks that extend well beyond the track.

Birthdays are celebrated together, businesses are launched through introductions made after training sessions and charity initiatives emerge from communities initially brought together by a simple morning run.

Cycling groups have developed similar cultures. Weekly rides frequently end at cafés that have become unofficial clubhouses, where conversations shift effortlessly from bike maintenance to careers, investment opportunities and family life.

Football leagues organised for office workers have become as much about camaraderie as competition, while hiking clubs offer urban residents an opportunity to reconnect with nature while forming meaningful social bonds.

Perhaps no sport better captures this intersection of recreation and networking than padel. Introduced to Kenya only a few years ago, the sport has expanded at remarkable speed.

The country's first dedicated padel club opened in 2023. By 2025, more than 70 courts had been established nationwide, and the Kenya Padel Federation had secured recognition from the International Padel Federation, signalling that what began as a niche pastime was rapidly evolving into an organised national sport.

Its appeal lies partly in accessibility. Unlike tennis, which often demands years of technical development, padel is relatively easy for beginners to enjoy. Played in doubles on enclosed courts, it naturally encourages conversation and collaboration.

Matches are followed by coffee, business discussions and social gatherings, making the sport particularly attractive to young professionals who view recreation and networking as complementary rather than separate pursuits.

This blending of fitness and community explains why participation continues to grow despite economic pressures. Gym memberships, race entry fees, bicycles and sports equipment all require discretionary spending at a time when household budgets remain under strain.

Yet many participants increasingly view these costs not as luxuries but as investments in physical health, mental wellbeing and social capital. In an era when loneliness and burnout have become common features of urban life, amateur sport offers a rare combination of movement, friendship and purpose.

Kenya's Mathew Kipsang wins the 5000M men's final at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, Scotland on Saturday.

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