# The Chronicle

WEEKLY

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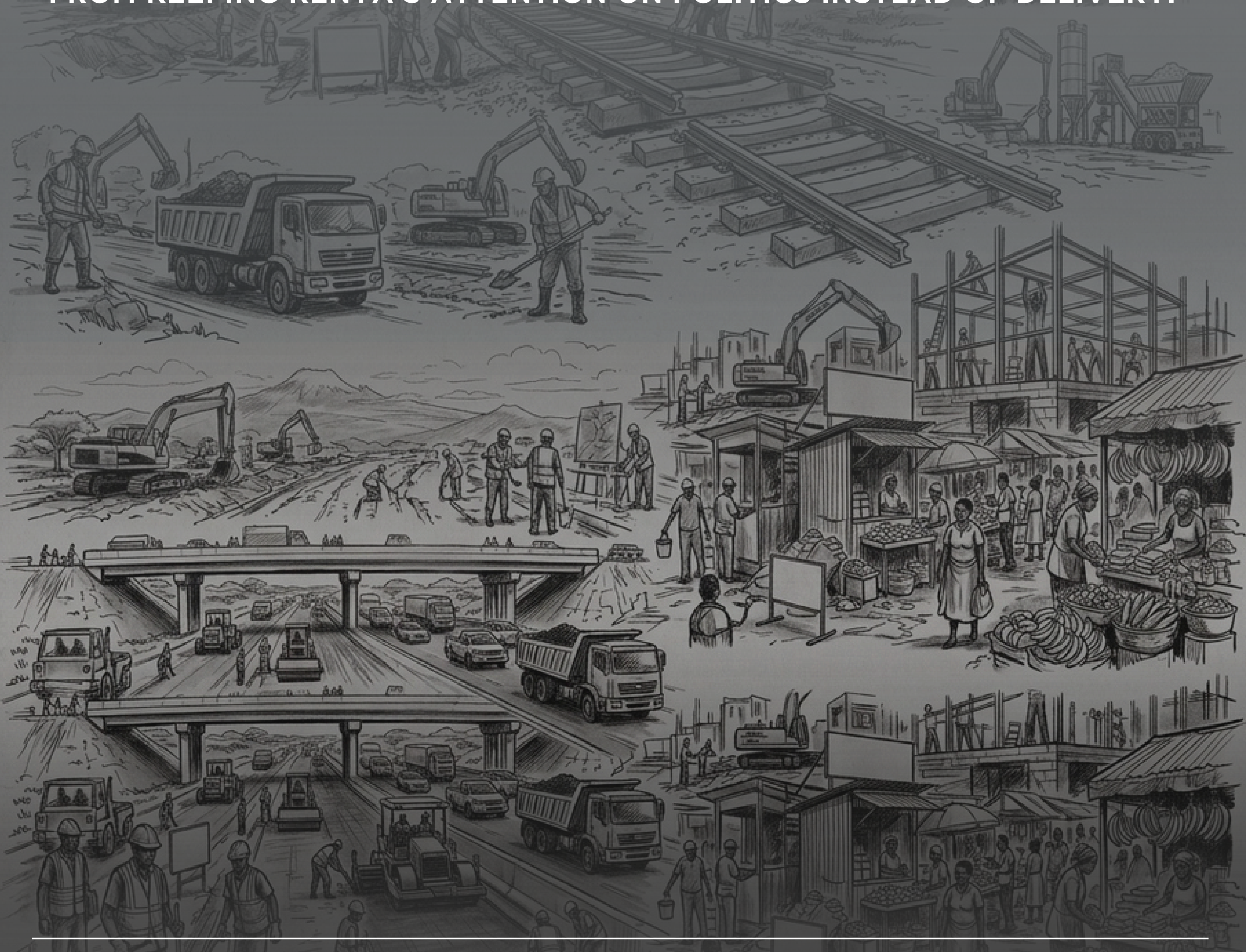
# Country we don't see: Politics clouding Kenya's progress

WHILE COALITION MATH DOMINATES HEADLINES, REAL INDICATORS OF PROGRESS GO UNREPORTED. THIS ISSUE ASKS WHAT, AND WHO, BENEFITS FROM KEEPING KENYA'S ATTENTION ON POLITICS INSTEAD OF DELIVERY.



## Kenya's next growth story may be about movement

KENYA'S NEXT GROWTH NARRATIVE IS FOCUSED ON MOBILITY, EMPHASIZING ROADS, RAILS, AND LOGISTICS RATHER THAN MANUFACTURING OR AGRICULTURE.

## 2027 election is already changing how Kenya sees development

2027 IS CHANGING HOW ACHIEVEMENTS ARE PRESENTED AND USED, WITH ELECTORAL TIMING TRANSFORMING DEVELOPMENT INTO CAMPAIGN CURRENCY.

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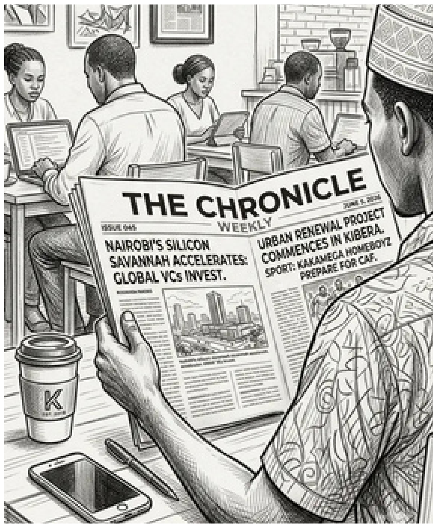


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## PERSPECTIVE

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Not shorter journeys but predictable ones. What the new twin corridor actually promises the traveller budgeting a trip home for Christmas.

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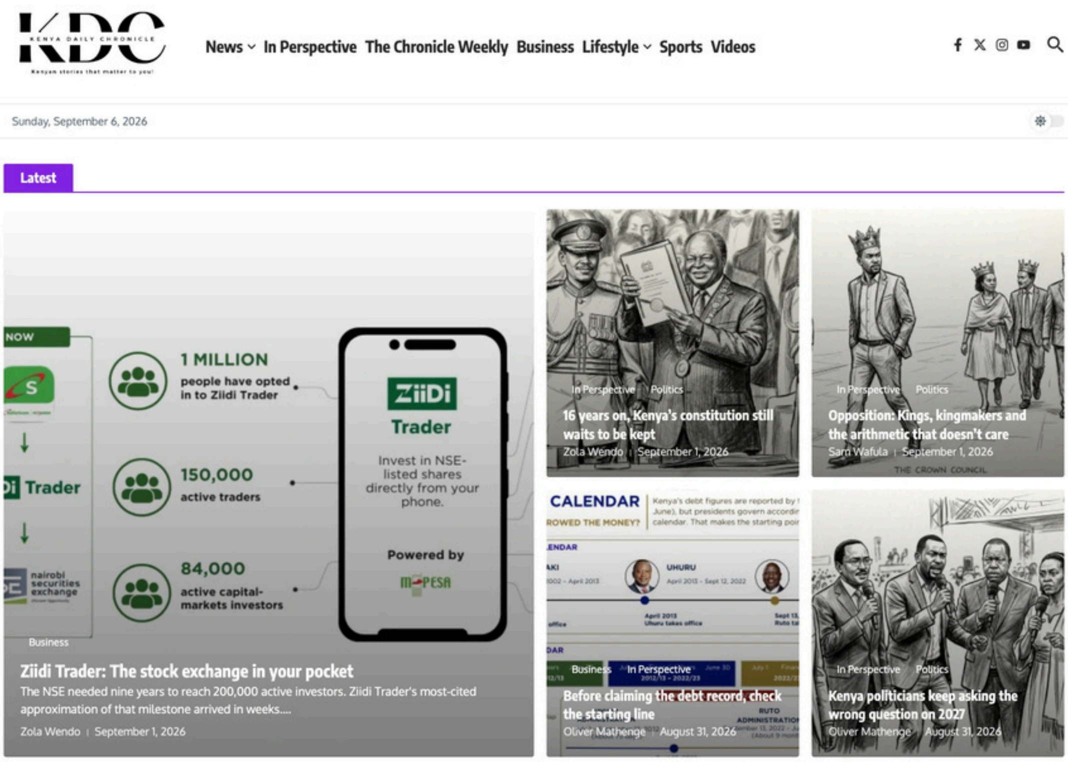


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While the Kenya Daily Chronicle delivers a mix of breaking news and real-time updates across politics, business, health, sports, and lifestyle, the Weekly is its considered, curated counterpart; a deeper read for audiences who want more than headlines.

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

Kenya is building two things at once this year, and only one of them is in the news.

The first is a railway pushing deep into Western Kenya and a rebuilt highway climbing out of the Rift Valley, roughly a trillion shillings in transport infrastructure, financed through mechanisms designed explicitly to avoid the debt arguments that shadowed the last SGR.

The second is a campaign. President Ruto launched the Naivasha–Kisumu line from Kibos, in the heart of a region his coalition has never comfortably won, sixteen months before an election. Every ribbon-cutting since has done double duty, but the opposition has been poking holes in all this even as its primary focus remains a coalition that it says will deny Ruto's administration a second term.

This issue is an attempt to separate those two projects, because Kenya has gotten very good at collapsing them into one conversation, and the collapse costs something.

When a road becomes a referendum on the president before it becomes a freight corridor, the question that actually determines whether the money was well spent - will this make it cheaper to move a sack of maize from Kericho to Nairobi - gets asked last, and usually years after the answer would have been useful.

We don't think that's simply politics being politics. Our Governance piece this week makes the harder argument: with trust in government sitting near record lows and seven in ten Kenyans saying tenders are rigged for the connected, asking "who benefits" before asking "does it work" isn't cynicism.

That's a genuine bind for a publication trying to have an economic conversation, and we don't think it resolves itself. It has to be built against the data, not assumed on top of it.


So this issue tries to hold both registers open at once. The cover story and its companion piece on the Rironi–Mau Summit road look at what's actually being built - the engineering, the financing, the Naivasha SEZ's bet on becoming an industrial cluster rather than a logistics layover.

The Data Story maps the corridor county by county. Politics traces how explicitly the 2027 campaign has already absorbed the language of development.

Economy and Business ask the question we think matters most and gets asked least: whether cheaper movement actually changes what Western Kenya produces and captures, or just how fast it can be shipped out.

And Life & Culture brings it down to the register that outlasts all of the above: whether a Nairobi–Kisumu trip costs the same the week before Christmas as it does in June.

None of this is a verdict. The railway isn't finished. The road is barely a third built. What we're arguing is narrower: that the years between groundbreaking and commissioning are exactly the years Kenya stops paying attention, and exactly the years the real economic case gets made or lost.

We would rather be watching now.

*Kenya Daily Chronicle Team*

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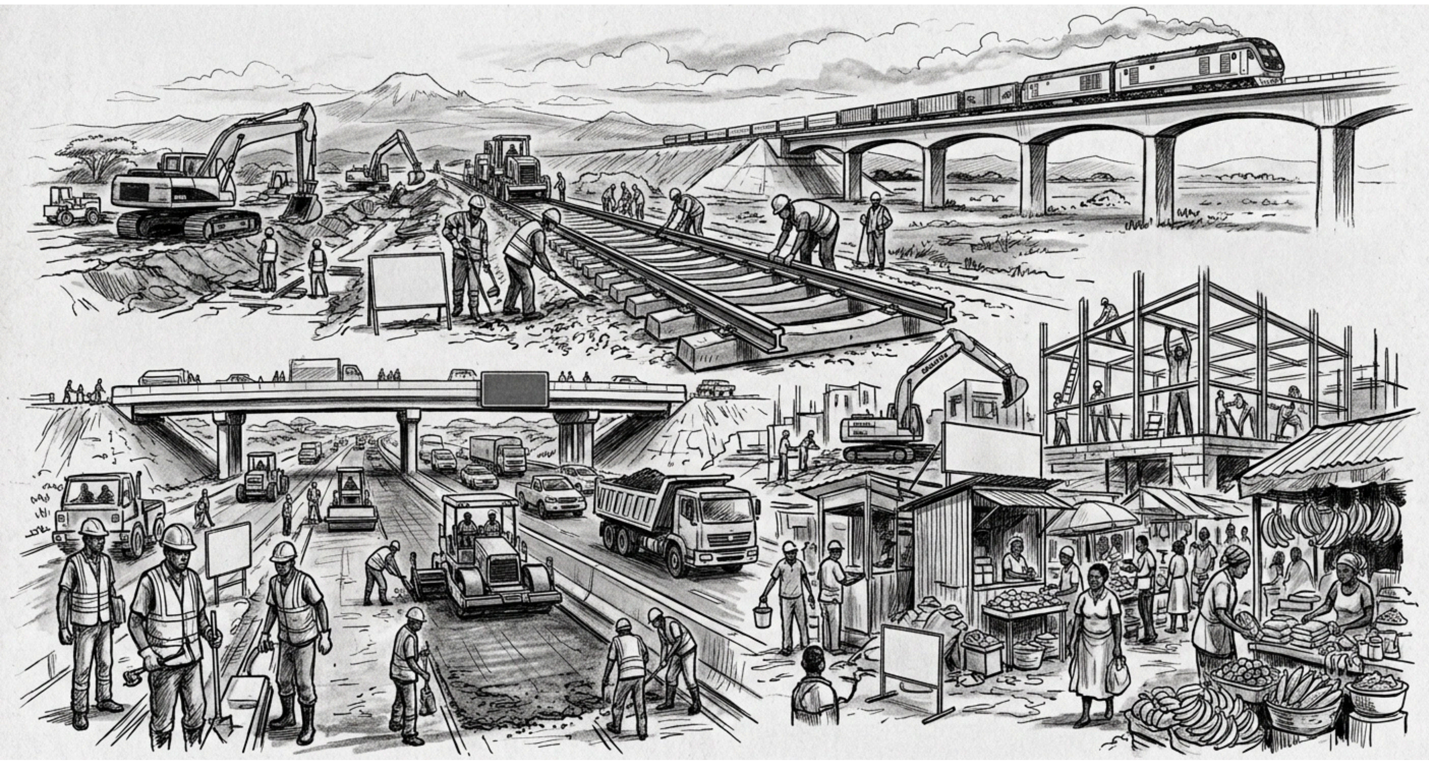
# The country we don’t see: Politics is clouding Kenya’s progress



Kenya has become very good at turning almost everything into a political argument. A road becomes a referendum on the president. A railway becomes evidence either of government delivery or government extravagance.

A new hospital is judged according to who commissioned it. A development project in one region is interpreted through the question of which political constituency stands to benefit.

Even before the concrete has dried, the politics surrounding a project can become louder than the economic case for building it.

That may be understandable in a country heading towards another fiercely contested election. But it can also make it difficult to see something important that is happening underneath the political noise: Kenya is gradually changing the physical infrastructure through which its economy operates.

This is the country we don't see — not because it is hidden, but because we have not yet learned to look at it as anything other than a political event.

Two projects illustrate the point particularly well. The extension of the Standard Gauge Railway from Naivasha through the Rift Valley to Kisumu and eventually Malaba is intended to push Kenya's modern railway network deep into Western Kenya and towards the Ugandan border.

The Naivasha–Kisumu section covers 264 kilometres, while the Kisumu–Malaba section adds another 107 kilometres, alongside an 8.69-kilometre branch connecting the railway to Kisumu Port.

At the same time, the ongoing transformation of the Rironi–Mau Summit road is aimed at one of the country's most important transport corridors, connecting Nairobi with the Rift Valley, Western Kenya and the wider East African market.

Seen separately, these are construction projects. Seen together, they are something much bigger: an attempt to reshape the economic geography of Kenya. And that is precisely the part of the story that risks being lost.

**We Have Been Here Before**

This would not be the first time Kenya built something transformative and then spent years arguing about it instead of using it. The original Mombasa–Nairobi standard gauge railway went through much the same cycle a decade ago.

Its construction was accompanied by relentless debate over cost overruns, procurement, Chinese financing and who stood to benefit politically from its delivery – a debate that consumed far more public attention than the practical question of what the railway would actually do to the cost of moving a container from the coast to the capital.

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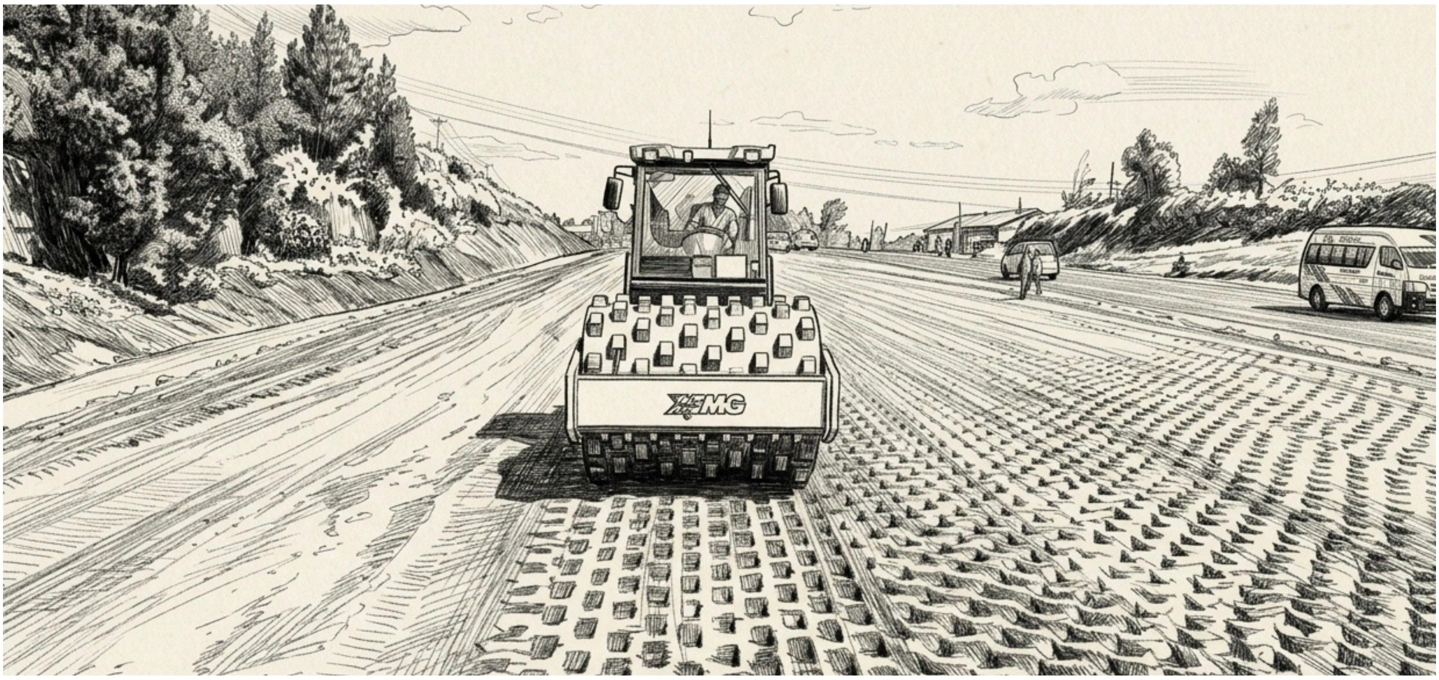



It took years after commissioning for a serious public conversation to emerge about utilisation rates, cargo volumes, and whether the railway was delivering on its economic promise. By then, the political argument had already been settled in most people's minds, for or against, along largely partisan lines.

The pattern is worth naming because it suggests something structural rather than accidental. Kenya's infrastructure debates tend to peak at the moment of announcement and again at the moment of commissioning – precisely the two moments when a project is most photogenic and least understood.

The years in between, when the real economic groundwork is being laid, attract almost no sustained attention. And the years after, when a railway or highway either does or does not deliver the transformation it promised, attract even less.

If that pattern holds for the Naivasha–Kisumu–Malaba line and the Rironi–Mau Summit corridor, Kenya risks spending 2026 and 2027 arguing about groundbreaking ceremonies and procurement contracts, only to seriously ask what either project actually changed well into the next decade – long after that answer might have shaped how the next round of infrastructure gets planned, financed or explained to the public paying for it.

**Bigger Than Politics**

There is a tendency in Kenyan politics to view development through ownership. Who brought the road? Who funded the railway? Which president launched it? Which region got it? Which politician can claim credit? Those questions matter politically, but they are not necessarily the questions that matter most economically.

A railway does not care which political party won the election. A highway does not distinguish between a Jubilee voter and a Kenya Kwanza voter. A logistics company does not move its cargo according to the political loyalties of the county through which it travels. Infrastructure has a longer life than the political administrations that build it.

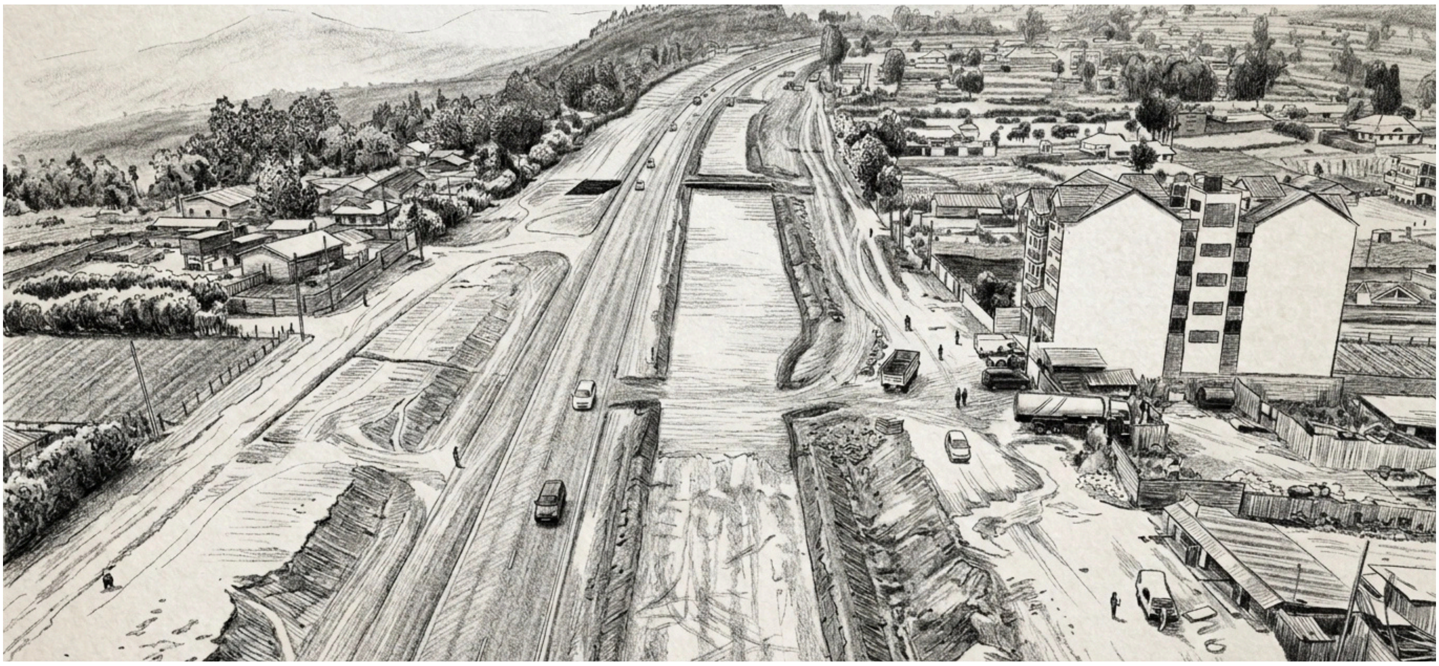
The real test is whether these investments make it cheaper, faster and more predictable to move people, agricultural produce, manufactured goods and other cargo. That is where the SGR extension becomes particularly interesting.

Western Kenya is one of the country's important agricultural and commercial regions, but its economic potential has long been constrained by the cost and reliability of moving goods. The region is not short of production, but efficient connections between production and markets. The railway has the potential to alter that equation.

A farmer, manufacturer or trader does not necessarily need another political speech about development. They need to know whether their goods can reach Kisumu, Nairobi, Mombasa or a neighbouring country more cheaply and reliably.

The Rironi–Mau Summit highway, which is not merely about making the journey from Nairobi to Nakuru comfortable. It sits on the Northern Corridor - an important trade route connecting the Port of Mombasa with Kenya's hinterland and landlocked economies in East and Central Africa.

Every hour saved on the road, every truck that spends less time in congestion, and every reduction in fuel consumption, vehicle maintenance and cargo delays has an economic value.



These gains are rarely as politically exciting as a groundbreaking ceremony, but over time they can be more consequential.

**The Corridor Effect**

The most important way to understand these projects may therefore be to stop looking at them as individual pieces of infrastructure. A road changes a road. A railway changes a railway. But a connected road, railway, port, logistics network and marketplace can change an economy.

Consider the geography being created. Mombasa connects Kenya to global shipping, Nairobi remains the financial and commercial centre, and Naivasha is positioned as a logistics and industrial node.

Nakuru sits at the intersection of agricultural production, trade and transport, Kericho is a major agricultural centre, and Kisumu provides access to the Lake Victoria basin.

Western Kenya connects the national economy to Uganda and, through the regional network, to Rwanda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The infrastructure connecting these places could make their economies less isolated from one another, and that is the potential that deserves attention.

The numbers provide a useful reminder of the scale of the opportunity. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, the volume of cargo transported by the SGR increased to more than 7.3 million tonnes in 2025, while cargo revenue also rose significantly.

The Port of Mombasa handled more than 45 million tonnes of cargo during the year, with transit cargo accounting for nearly 16 million tonnes.

These are not abstract numbers. They describe the movement of the economy.

When the cost of moving goods falls, markets become larger; when travel becomes more predictable, businesses can plan better; and when a farmer can reach a larger market, production can become more commercially viable.

Infrastructure therefore has a multiplier effect that is difficult to capture in the politics of ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Its achievement may eventually be that people stop talking about the infrastructure because the economic activity it enables has become normal.

**Opportunity For Western Kenya**

But there is an important caveat. Building a railway into Western Kenya does not automatically transform the region. The infrastructure creates an opportunity, and what happens next depends on what businesses, farmers, counties and national institutions do with it.

The critical question then is whether the railway and road network will help Western Kenya create more value or merely make it easier to transport raw materials out of the region.

If agricultural products simply move faster to processing centres elsewhere, Western Kenya gains from better logistics but may not capture the full economic value of its production. However, if better transport is paired with agro-processing, cold-chain infrastructure, warehouses, manufacturing, financial services and new investment, the effect could be larger.

Kisumu could become more important as a logistics and regional trade centre. Smaller towns along the corridor could attract new businesses.

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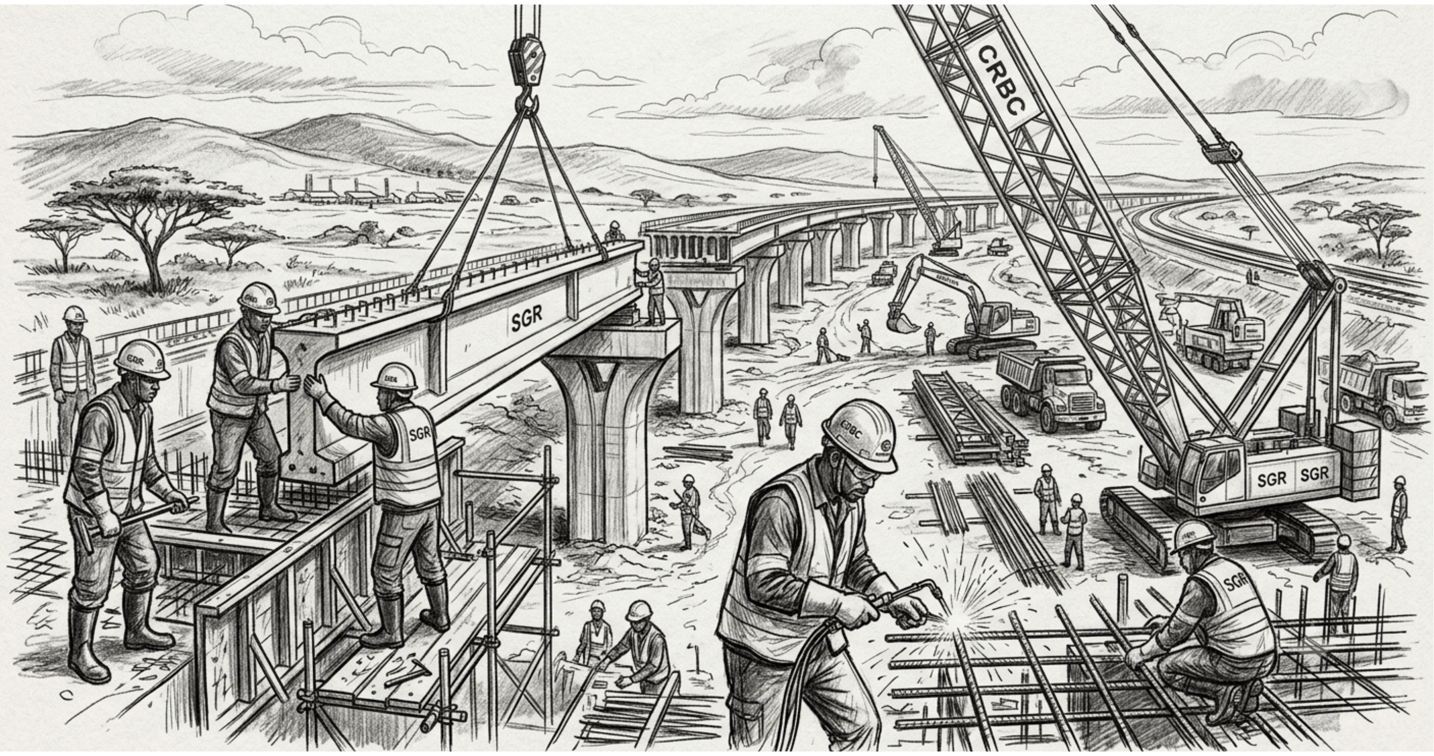


Farmers could gain access to larger markets. Manufacturers could reconsider locations that previously appeared too far from major transport networks.

This is how infrastructure can change economic geography, but it requires policy beyond the road and railway. It requires counties to prepare land and industrial zones, reliable electricity and water, predictable taxation and regulation, financial institutions willing to finance businesses outside Nairobi, skills, security, and above all, an understanding that transport infrastructure is an enabler, not an economic strategy by itself.

Instead of asking simply whether Ruto has built the railway, Kenya should be asking what Kenya intends to build around the railway.

**Danger Of Development as Political Trophies**

Governments need to demonstrate that they are delivering while the opposition needs to scrutinise how public money is being spent. Citizens have every right to question costs, procurement, financing arrangements, debt and whether projects offer value for money.

But accountability and cynicism are not the same thing because a project can be expensive and still be economically useful or politically motivated and still produce public value.

A project can be A government can deserve scrutiny while an infrastructure project it delivers deserves an honest assessment. Kenya needs to become better at holding these ideas simultaneously.

The danger of viewing every project exclusively through politics is that the country ends up having two conversations instead of one. The first is about whether the government deserves credit. The second, much more important one, is about whether Kenya is becoming more productive.

The first dominates television, social media and political rallies. The second tends to happen quietly in boardrooms, farms, warehouses, factories and transport yards. Yet it is the second conversation that will determine whether these investments ultimately matter.

Kenya has entered the election season, and there is little reason to expect the political noise to diminish. If anything, every major infrastructure project will increasingly be interpreted as evidence for or against the government seeking another mandate.

But perhaps the country needs to look beyond the political moment. Some of the infrastructure being built today will still be carrying people and goods long after the politicians who inaugurated it have left office. The railway will outlive the campaign posters. The highway will outlive the speeches. The economic corridors will remain long after the political arguments have moved on.

In the pages that follow, we try to look past the ribbon-cuttings and the rallies: at what the corridor could mean for Western Kenya, at how the 2027 election is already shaping the way Kenya talks about development, at what a connected country might actually feel like for the people living along these routes — and at whether Kenya is building the country it thinks it is.

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# The road that could rewire Kenya's economic geography

Ask any driver who has made the run from Nairobi to Nakuru what the road means to them, and the answer will rarely be about economic geography.

It will be about the crawl through Nakuru town, the overtaking on blind corners near Gilgil, and multiple black spots that have made this stretch of the A8 one of the most dangerous roads in Kenya, particularly during festive seasons. That reputation – a corridor "notorious for accidents, delays and high operating costs," in KeNHA's own description – is the road most Kenyans actually know.

The Rironi–Mau Summit project is being sold as the answer to that reputation. But its real significance lies one layer beneath the safety pitch. This is not a resurfacing job; it is an attempt to rebuild the physical spine of the Northern Corridor as industrial infrastructure, with a special economic zone at Naivasha as the clearest evidence.

**What Is Actually Being Built**

The numbers are larger than a typical highway upgrade. The project covers roughly 233 kilometres in total – the 175-kilometre Nairobi–Nakuru–Mau Summit section and the 58-kilometre Rironi–Maai Mahiu–Naivasha branch – crossing Kiambu, Nyandarua and Nakuru counties.

It converts a corridor that has long operated as a single carriageway into a four-lane dual carriageway between Rironi and Naivasha, widening to six lanes between Naivasha and Nakuru, where traffic volumes are heaviest.

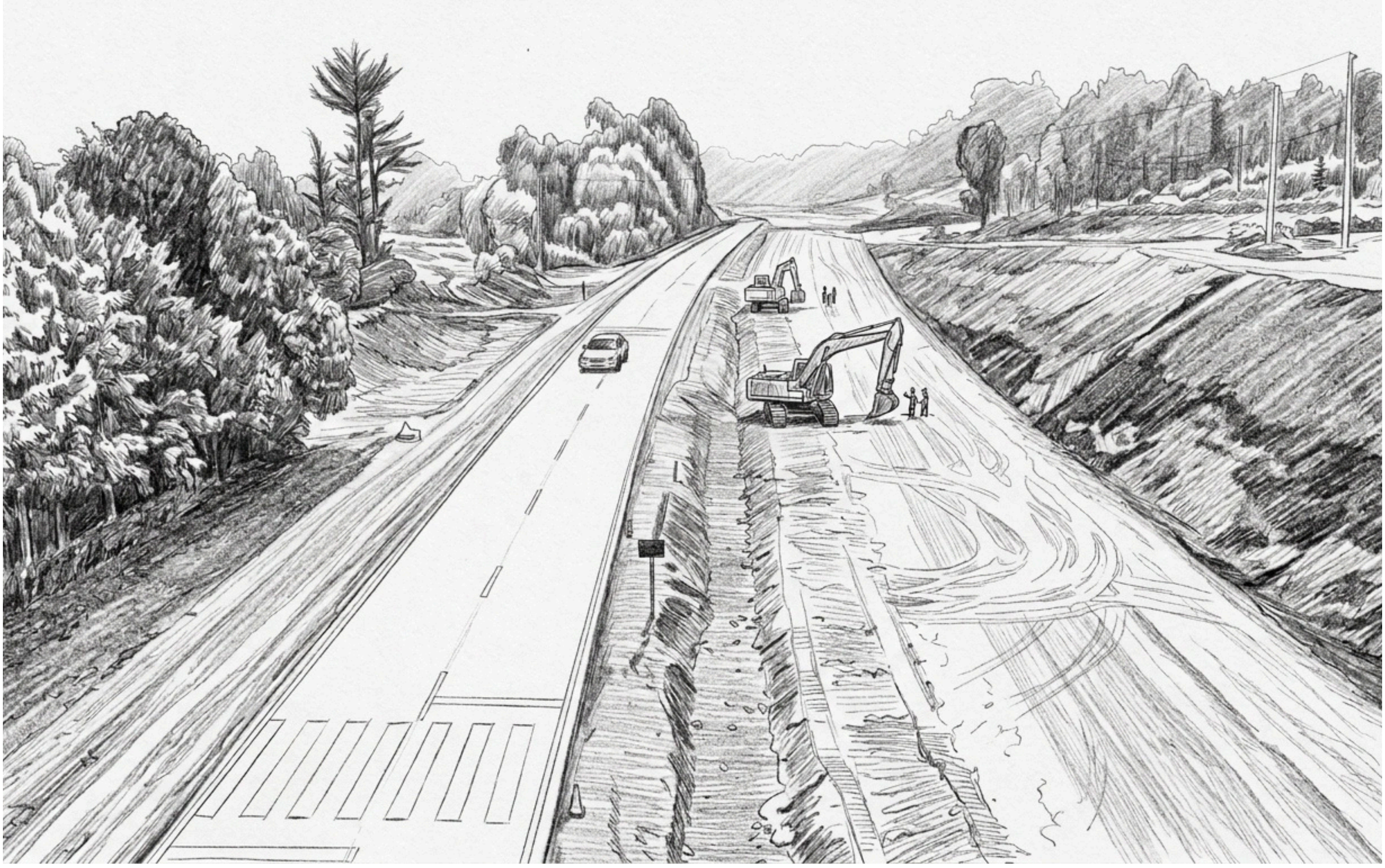
The financing structure is as significant as the engineering.

The project is being delivered as a Design-Build-Finance-OperaMaintain-Transfer public-private partnership, costed at roughly USD 863 million – figures elsewhere put the total at Ksh 170–200 billion – under a 28-to-30-year concession.

The winning consortium pairs China Road and Bridge Corporation, the same contractor building the SGR extension, with an unusual financing partner.

Kenya's National Social Security Fund, the pension fund that manages the retirement savings of millions of Kenyan workers, now directly invested in a toll road that those same workers will eventually pay to drive on.

Motorists will pay a base toll of roughly Sh8–8.50 per kilometre, rising by a further one per cent annually, at stations along the route.



The PPP Directorate insists this will be ring-fenced for maintenance, safety patrols, lighting and emergency response on the same corridor. Kenya's roads sector alone needs an estimated Sh4 trillion over the next decade, according to the PPP Directorate – Sh1 trillion for maintenance and Sh3 trillion for new development – a figure officials argue makes conventional public financing of a project this size close to impossible.

The project was originally evaluated as a single package before the government split it into two separate lots – Rironi–Gilgil and Gilgil–Nakuru–Mau Summit – awarded to two different contractors. Critics have called this a departure from the transparency the PPP Act itself requires, even as officials insist the state retains full ownership and step-in rights if the private operator underperforms.

**The Road As Industrial Policy**

The clearest sign of what this corridor is meant to become sits roughly fourteen kilometres along the Maai Mahiu–Narok road from the highway itself: the Naivasha Special Economic Zone, a project that predates the current road upgrade by years but depends on it completely.

Naivasha SEZ began as a 1,000-acre site built around an Inland Container Depot directly connected to the SGR line, and has since been expanded to 6,000 acres to accommodate rising investor interest.

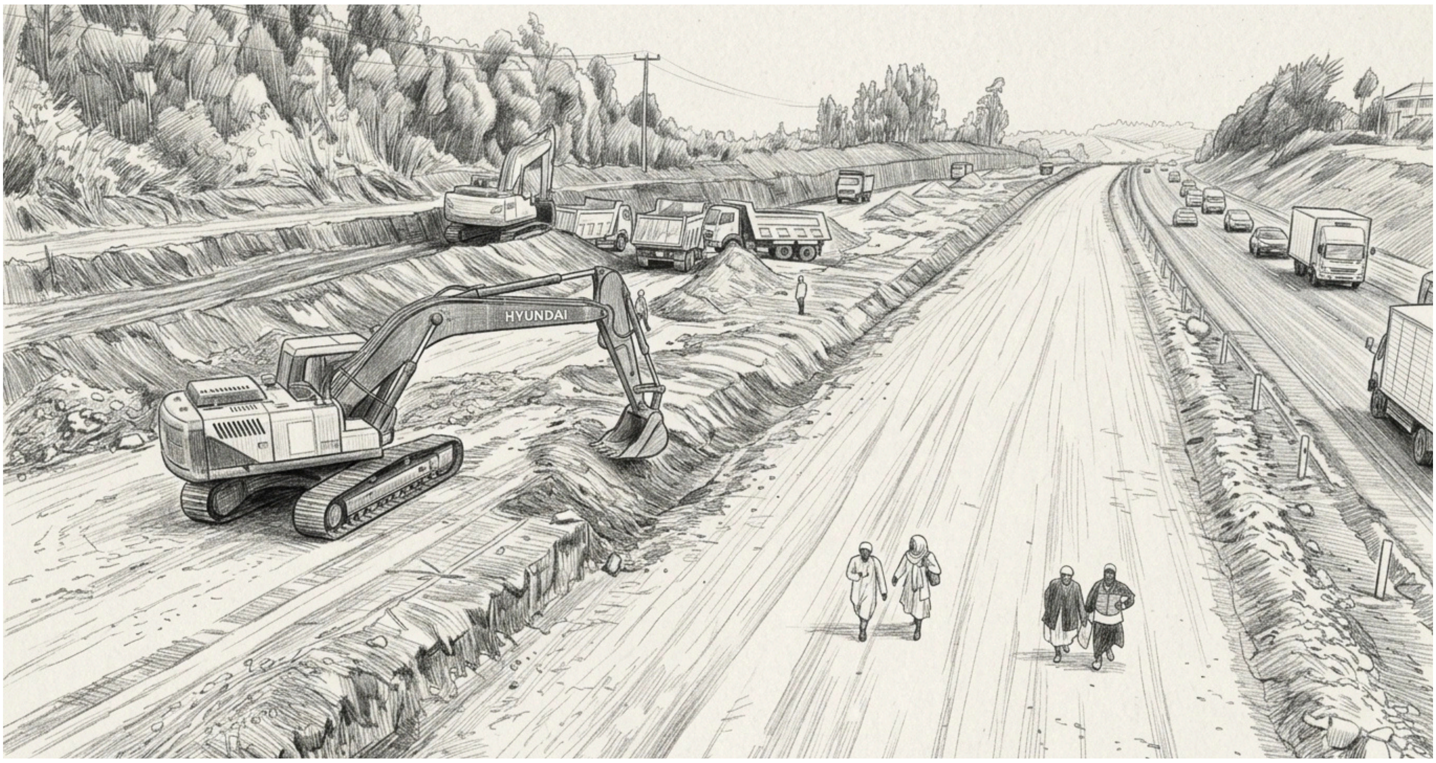
It offers what may be its single strongest selling point: electricity at roughly Ksh 5 per kilowatt-hour, drawn from a dedicated 90 MVA substation tied into the geothermal fields at nearby Olkaria — a cost advantage manufacturers elsewhere in Kenya cannot access.

Fourteen investors have already signed on, including Accurate Steel Mill, Africa Global Logistics and Tad Motor SEZ, with the government reporting 97 land applications covering nearly 7,000 acres, and Afreximbank separately securing 500 acres for its own industrial park within the zone.

The targeted sectors read like a blueprint for the "value-capture" question raised elsewhere in this issue: textiles and apparel, motor vehicle assembly, steel, agro-processing, construction materials, electronics and pharmaceuticals – industries that turn raw inputs into higher-value finished goods, rather than simply passing raw materials through.

Naivasha's pitch to investors is explicit: geothermal power, direct rail access to Mombasa and, once complete, a widened highway link back to Nairobi, positioned as an inland extension of the port's own logistics corridor rather than a stand-alone industrial park.

Independent assessment of the SEZ strategy so far is more cautious than the government's own promotional language.




A mid-2026 review found Kenya's publicly backed SEZ flagships – Naivasha among them – had made substantial progress on land preparation, infrastructure and investor commitments, but had yet to translate that into large-scale manufacturing output, a pattern the same review notes is not unusual internationally for zones at this stage of development.

Privately developed Tatu City, by contrast, has already converted serviced land into thousands of jobs and billions of shillings in investment – a reminder that infrastructure readiness alone does not guarantee industrial output, and that the road, the railway and the substation are necessary conditions for Naivasha's ambitions, not sufficient ones.

**What Success And Failure Look Like**

If the Rironi–Mau Summit corridor works as intended, its success will be legible in two quite different registers.

The first is the register KeNHA is emphasising publicly: fewer crashes on a historically deadly stretch of road, and travel time between Nairobi and Mau Summit cut by several hours once the dual carriageway and the Nakuru bypass are complete. That is a real and measurable public good, independent of anything else this corridor is meant to achieve.

The second register is slower and harder to see: whether Naivasha SEZ's investor list grows from fourteen companies into a genuine manufacturing cluster, and whether the geothermal-power advantage and the rail-and-road connectivity actually draw steel, textile and vehicle-assembly investment away from Nairobi and the coast.

It also matters whether the toll revenue funding the road's thirty-year concession is matched by freight and passenger volumes that make the whole financing structure sustainable rather than merely survivable.

Kenya has built plenty of roads that solved the safety problem and stopped there.

Whether this one becomes the spine of an actual industrial corridor – or simply a faster, safer, more expensive way to drive between the same places Kenyans already drive between – depends on decisions being made now, in a special economic zone most drivers on the road will never see, by investors who have not yet decided whether to bet on it.

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# THE MAP
## POLITICS ISN'T SHOWING YOU

Kenya is currently building a new transport corridor — a railway extension pushing into Western Kenya and a highway rebuild along the Northern Corridor. Most coverage of either project has focused on who launched it and who benefits politically.

## SGR EXTENSION TO MALABA

- Naivasha-Kisumu section
- Kisumu - hub and port branch
- Kisumu-Malaba section

Naivasha, Nakuru County - Existing SGR Terminus

**Narok County**
Construction start point, Emurtoto and Suswa

**Bomet County**
Mulot and Bomet stations

**Kericho County**
Sotik crossing

**Nyamira County**
Sondu crossing

**Kisumu County**
Section end, plus 8.69km branch to Kisumu Port

**Siaya County**
Ramala and Yala stations

**Vihiga County**
Musanda crossing

**Kakamega County**
Mumias and Manyulia stations

**Busia County**
Amukura crossing, Malaba border terminus

### THE NUMBERS

| | |
|---|---|
| **475 KM** | Total length of the Naivasha–Kisumu–Malaba extension across its full network footprint. |
| **264 KM** | The Naivasha–Kisumu section (Phase 2B), starting from Emurtoto in Narok County. |
| **8.69 KM** | The branch line connecting the mainline to Kisumu Port, reviving a port that has operated well below capacity for years. |
| **107 KM** | The Kisumu–Malaba section (Phase 2C), terminating at the Uganda border. |
| **9** | The number of counties the line crosses: Narok, Bomet, Kericho, Nyamira, Kisumu, and onward toward Busia. |
| **Sh390** | A proposed securitised bond designed to avoid new traditional external debt. |

## RIRONI - MAU SUMMIT ROAD

- Rironi-Gilgil lot, CRBC-NSSF
- A8 South Branch to Naivasha
- Gilgil-Nakuru-Mau Summit lot, Shandong Hi-Speed

**Rironi, Kiambu County**
Corridor Start Point

**Maai Mahiu, Nakuru County**
On the A8 South Branch

**Naivasha, Nakuru County**
Sotik crossing

**Gilgil, Nakuru County**
Boundary Between The Two Lots

**Nakuru Town, Nakuru County**
Elevated ByPass, widens to six lanes

**Mau Summit, Nakuru County**
Corridor Terminus

### THE NUMBERS

| | |
|---|---|
| **233 KM** | Total length of the Rironi–Mau Summit corridor upgrade, part of the wider A8 highway. |
| **175 KM** | The Nairobi–Nakuru–Mau Summit section. |
| **58 KM** | The Rironi–Maai Mahiu–Naivasha branch (A8 South). |
| **81 KM** | The Rironi–Gilgil section alone, the first due for completion, targeted for December 2026. |
| **Sh8** | The toll per kilometre motorists will pay once sections open, under a 28-to-30-year concession before the road reverts to the KeNHA. |

# 2027 election is already changing how Kenya sees development

On a Saturday in March 2026, President William Ruto stood in Kibos, Kisumu County, alongside Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni to launch construction of the Naivasha–Kisumu–Malaba SGR.

The choice of location was not incidental. Kisumu, and the wider Nyanza and Western regions, have for decades been considered opposition strongholds – territory the ruling party has historically struggled to win outright at the ballot box.

The railway launch was one stop on a five-day development tour through Luo Nyanza that took in project sites in Homa Bay, Siaya and Migori counties, bridges, markets and blue-economy investments on Lake Victoria.

It was timed roughly sixteen months before the 2027 General Election and months after Ruto struck a shared government arrangement with the Orange Democratic Movement leader Raila Odinga.

Political analysts have been direct about what this represents: a deliberate attempt to use infrastructure spending to reconfigure loyalties in regions that have not traditionally voted for the incumbent.

This is the context in which the SGR extension and the Rironi–Mau Summit upgrade are being built – not a neutral backdrop, but the central mechanism through which the 2027 contest is already being fought.

**Infrastructure As A Campaign Platform**

Government officials have said openly that infrastructure delivery will be the clearest measure of the administration's performance heading into the election, particularly as global economic pressures make other campaign arguments – cost of living, taxation, employment – harder to win.

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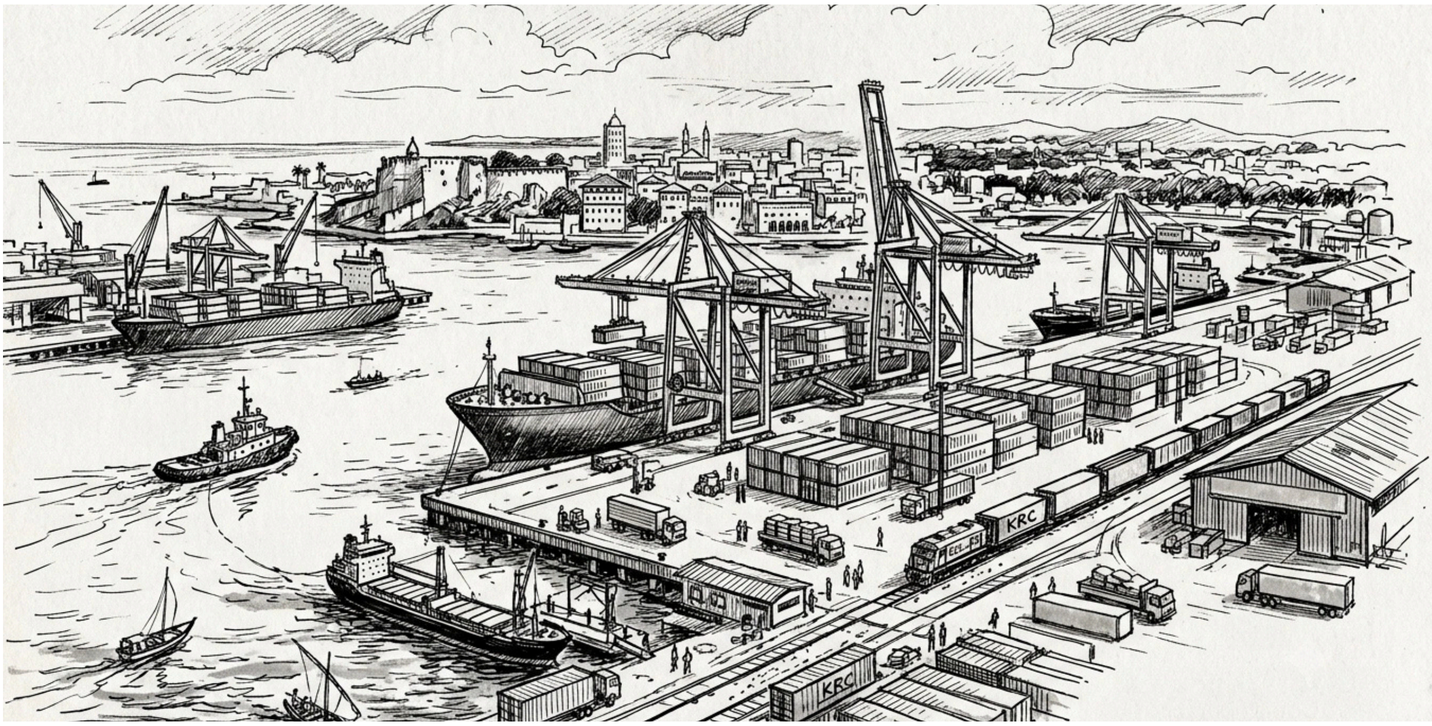
The FY2026/27 budget reflects that calculation: infrastructure projects were among the largest beneficiaries of new allocations, with roads, railways, energy and water projects drawing substantial funding even as the bulk of the national budget continues to go toward recurrent expenditure.




Behind that spending sits an even larger instrument: the National Infrastructure Fund, signed into law in March 2026, designed to mobilise roughly Sh5 trillion (about $38 billion) over the next decade using domestic capital rather than foreign loans.

Ruto has described it as a mechanism to transform how Kenya finances major projects. Critics have described it rather differently.

Former deputy president Rigathi Gachagua called it a vehicle to influence the election outcome, while lawmaker Ndindi Nyoro – once a close Ruto ally – has warned that its structure could let the government borrow outside the normal budget process altogether.

Whichever reading is closer to accurate, the fund illustrates the same underlying pattern this issue has traced from the cover story onward: an infrastructure decision of enormous scale, being evaluated almost entirely through the lens of whom it helps politically, rather than through the lens of what it will actually finance and how well.

**The Corridor As A Map Of Voters**

It is not only Nyanza. The SGR extension and the Rironi–Mau Summit corridor between them touch Narok, Bomet, Kericho, Nyamira, Kisumu and the wider Rift Valley and Western regions – a geography that maps unusually closely onto the coalition-building Ruto has undertaken since 2024.

Analysts tracking the 2027 race have noted a broader strategy of directing infrastructure toward historically marginalised or opposition-leaning communities.

The dualling of the Nairobi–Eldoret–Malaba highway, the SGR's push into Western Kenya, even the symbolic relocation of national celebrations to regions rarely used for them before.

The logic is straightforward and, in Kenyan politics, well established. Infrastructure is the most visible form of political currency available to an incumbent, precisely because it is large, physically undeniable, and easy to point to on a campaign stop. A market or a bridge photographs well. A tax policy does not.

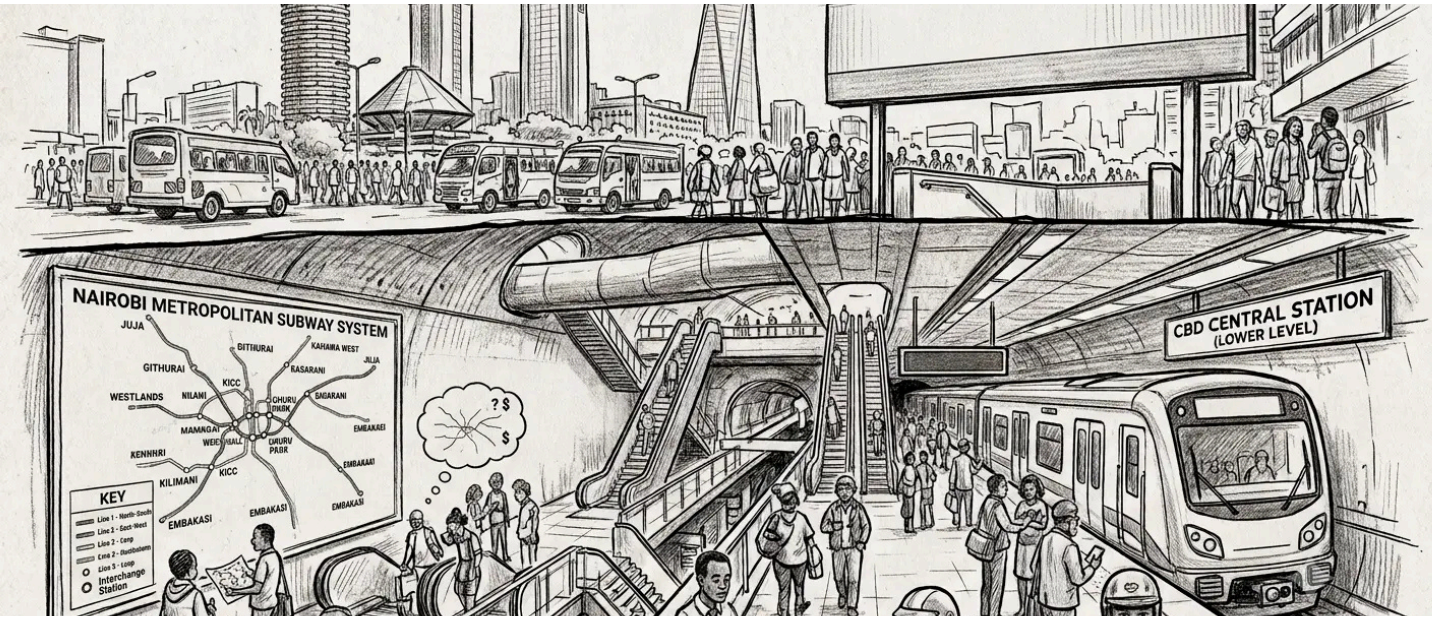
But the same analysts who track this strategy are divided on whether it actually works. Some argue that Kenyans do not vote for projects; they vote on emotional and identity-based grounds, and politicians with strong development records have lost their seats.

Others counter that in a coalition built on arithmetic rather than affection, visible delivery in previously neglected regions can shift enough marginal support to matter, even if it never produces outright loyalty.

Both positions can be true at once, and that ambiguity is itself revealing.

Nobody in this debate – government, opposition, or analyst – is actually arguing about whether the railway will lower freight costs into Kisumu, or whether the highway will cut logistics costs for businesses moving goods through Nakuru.

The argument is entirely about whether building it wins votes. The economic question and the political question have almost completely separated from one another, even though they are being funded by the same shilling.




### What Gets Lost

This matters beyond the immediate horse-race coverage, for two reasons. The first is accountability. When a road or railway is framed primarily as a gift to a region rather than an economic asset, the natural follow-up questions – is it being built to specification, is the financing sustainable, will it be maintained after the concession period ends – tend to receive far less scrutiny than the political question of who gets credit for it.

A Sh5 trillion fund raises serious governance questions regardless of who is in power; those questions risk being drowned out by the election-year argument over whether the fund itself is a rigging vehicle.

The second is sequencing. Development tours, groundbreaking ceremonies and commissioning events cluster heavily around election years, which means the public conversation about a project peaks at the two moments – announcement and launch – when there is the least evidence available about whether it will actually work.

The years of construction in between, and the years of operation afterwards, receive comparatively little sustained political or media attention, because by then the electoral utility of the story has passed.

### The Recurring Question

None of this means the SGR extension or the Rironi–Mau Summit corridor are bad investments, or that using development to build political coalitions is unique to this administration.

It is a well-worn feature of Kenyan politics, practised by every government since independence in one form or another.

What is worth naming is simply how completely the language of the 2027 campaign has absorbed the language of development, to the point where it becomes difficult to discuss one without immediately defaulting to the other.

The corridor pieces in this issue try to hold those two conversations apart deliberately – not because the politics doesn't matter, but because somebody needs to keep asking the economic question while the political argument runs its course.

Whether the railway changes Western Kenya's economic prospects and whether it changes the 2027 election result are, in the end, two entirely different questions. Kenya currently has excellent answers forming to the second. It has barely begun to ask the first.

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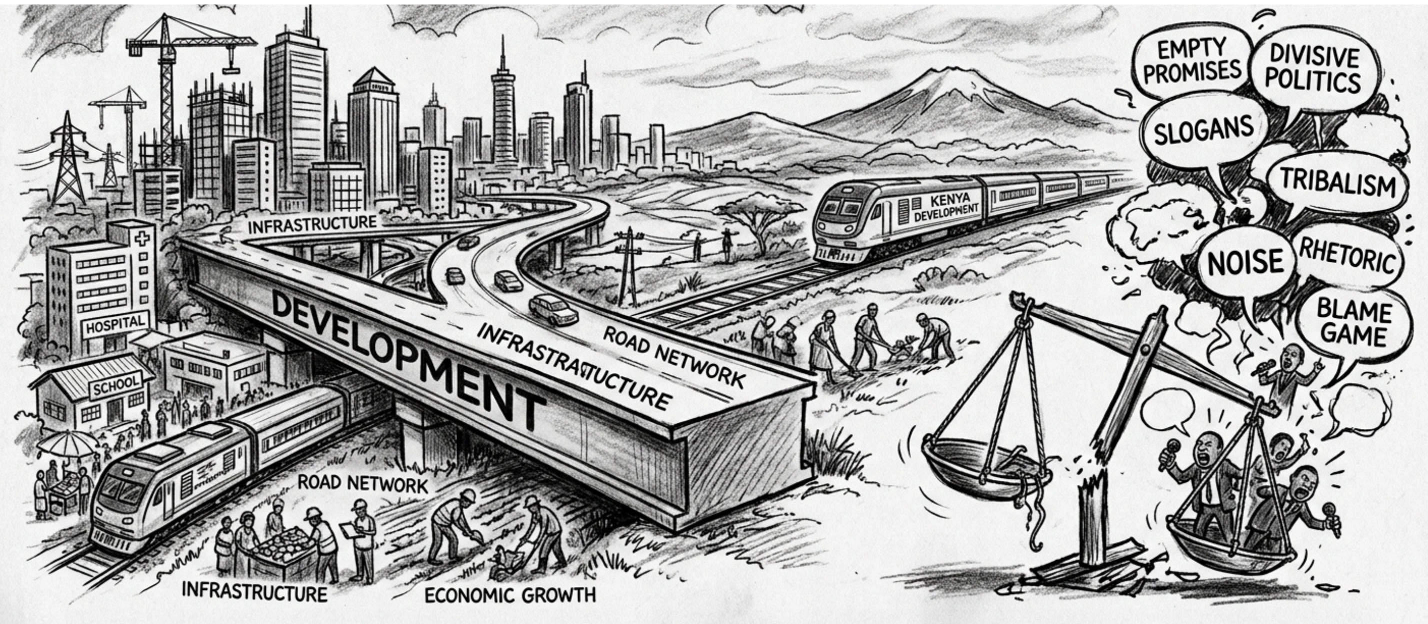
# Why Kenya struggles to have a conversation about progress




Only 38 per cent of Kenyan adults say they trust their government to do what is right, according to the Edelman Trust Institute's 2025 Trust Barometer – a four-percentage-point decline on the year before, and part of a longer downward slide Afrobarometer has been tracking since 2021.

Trust in specific institutions is worse still: just 36 per cent of Kenyans express confidence in the police, and trust in national government bodies runs lower, with rural Kenyans consistently more trusting than urban ones, and trust falling as education levels rise.

Therefore, every infrastructure announcement in this issue is being not being made on neutral ground. A government asking Kenyans to see SGR extension or the Rironi–Mau Summit road as evidence of economic transformation is asking a public that does not believe that it tells it the truth in the first place.

**Economy Already Top Complaint**

Afrobarometer's most recent surveys find that management of the economy has topped Kenyans' list of priority problems for the government to address since 2021, ahead of corruption, health, unemployment and security. Corruption has ranked among the top two for six consecutive years.

And on both fronts – the economy and corruption – most Kenyans rate government performance poorly. Only 17 per cent say the government is managing the economy fairly or very well, only 22 per cent give it credit for fighting corruption, and just 14 per cent rate it positively on job creation.

A January 2026 Afrobarometer dispatch adds a more specific charge: seven in ten Kenyans say the government is doing a poor job of fighting corruption in the awarding of tenders and contracts, and cite the manipulation of government tenders to favour politically connected "tenderpreneurs" as one of the central obstacles to effective public service delivery.

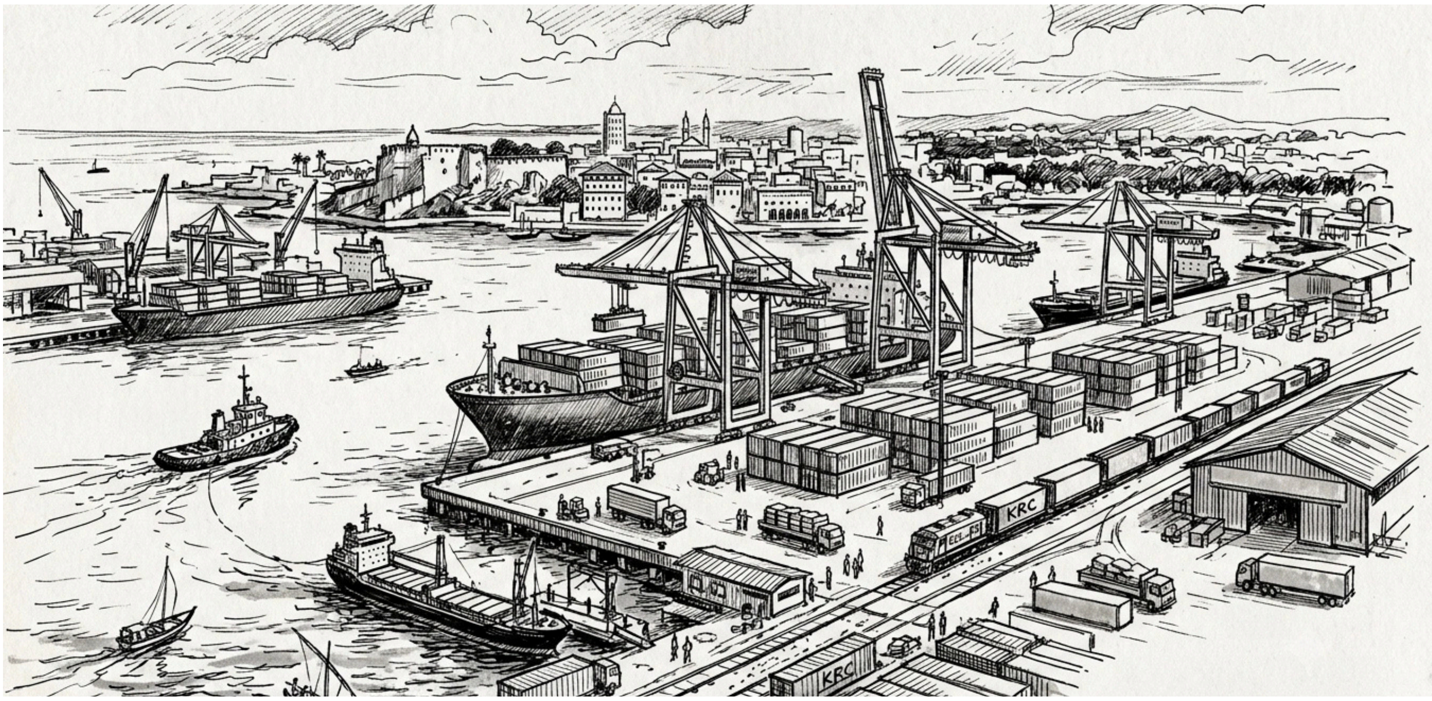
That is not an abstract governance complaint. It is precisely the terrain the SGR extension, the Rironi–Mau Summit road and the National Infrastructure Fund all sit on – multi-billion-shilling contracts, awarded through processes the public has already told pollsters it does not fully trust.

**Why This Makes Economic Conversation Harder**

It would be easy to read these numbers as simply confirming what Kenyan politics already looks like: an electorate sceptical of its government, discounting official claims accordingly. But the consequence runs deeper than scepticism about any one project.

When trust in institutions delivering infrastructure is this low, every claim about that infrastructure's economic value becomes, in effect, contested territory before the facts are even examined.

Tell a citizen who does not trust the government's tendering process that a railway extension will transform Western Kenya's economy, and the most natural response is not to evaluate the freight economics – it is to ask the contracts's beneficiary.




Tell the same citizen that a toll road financed partly through their own pension fund will cut logistics costs, and the natural response is not to model the savings; it is to ask why their retirement savings were put at risk to build it.

Neither response is irrational. Both are exactly what six consecutive years of Afrobarometer data would predict from a public that ranks corruption as a top-two national problem and gives government a failing grade on managing it.

This is the deeper version of the argument this issue has made from its cover story onward: politics is not simply distracting Kenyans from an economic conversation about infrastructure.  In a low-trust environment, the political question - who benefits, who is connected, who is skimming - is often the more rational question to ask first, because Kenyans have been shown that it is frequently the right one.

**All Institutions Struggling**

Kenya has not been without institutional efforts to shift this conversation onto firmer ground. The 2010 Constitution's creation of county governments was partly meant to bring accountability for public spending closer to citizens; the national Open Government Partnership action plan running through 2027 explicitly targets more accessible budgetary data as a trust-building measure.

Neither has yet moved the underlying numbers. Trust in county-level service delivery remains mixed at best, and the specific institutions meant to police major contracts – procurement oversight, anti-corruption bodies – are themselves rated poorly by the same surveys that show declining trust in government overall.

The economic case for the SGR extension and the Rironi–Mau Summit corridor depends on independent, credible information reaching the public about freight volumes, contract terms, toll structures and financing risk. This is the kind of information Kenyans currently have the least reason to trust when it comes from government sources.

Media coverage, when it engages with these projects at all, tends to default to the political register – who launched it, who criticised it – partly because that is the register in which official information is most readily supplied, and partly because it is the register audiences have learned to expect.

**What Better Conversation Requires**

None of this means the economic conversation this issue is trying to have is impossible. It means it has to be built deliberately, against the grain of six years of declining trust data, rather than assumed to follow naturally once the concrete is poured.

That likely means independent, disaggregated data – freight volumes by route, toll revenue against projected debt service, county-level uptake of industrial land – published on a cadence that lets journalists and citizens check government claims against outcomes, rather than against announcements.

It also means being honest that scepticism about who benefits from a Sh900 billion corridor investment is not a distraction from Kenya's development story. Given what Kenyans say they believe about their government's institutions, it may be the most economically literate question available to them – right up until better information gives them a different one to ask instead.

## In Numbers

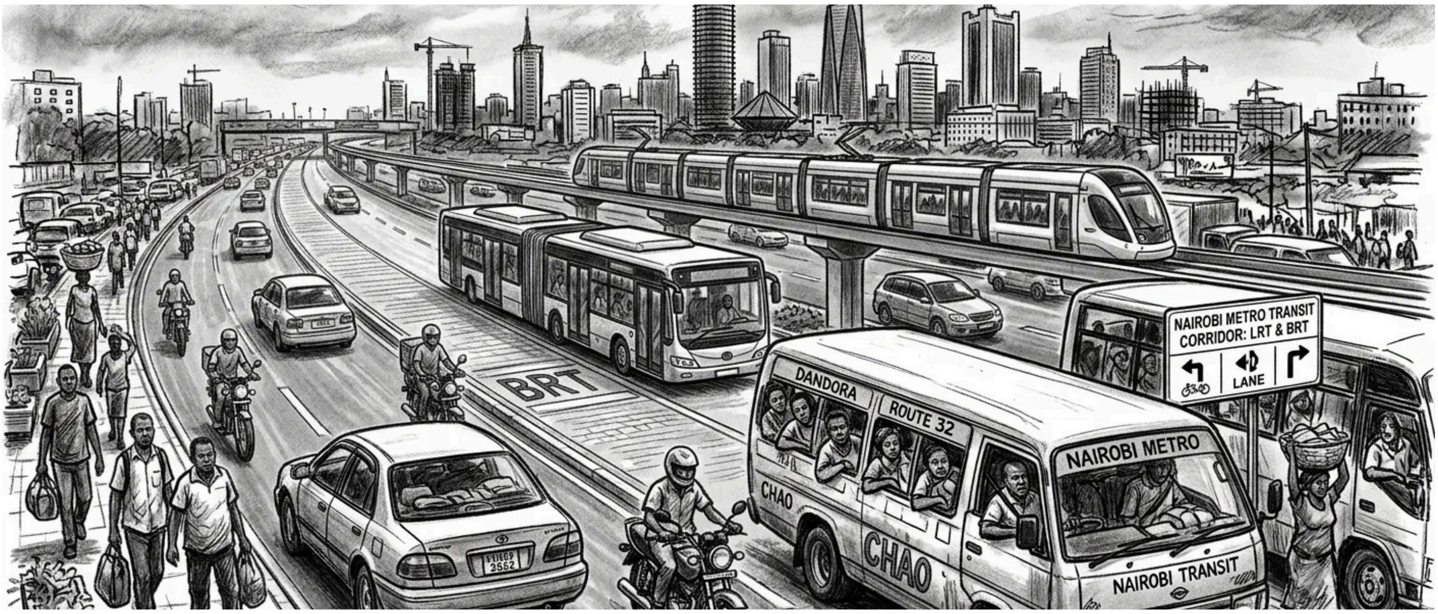
| 5,080 | 4 | Sh1.49 bn | 100,000 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **CONSTABLES** | **COURTS** | **REVENUE** | **HOUSEHOLDS** |
| Number of Administration Police Recruits a the 59th Passing-Out Parade at the National Police College in Embakasi. | The number of new Magistrates' Courts that the Chief Justice gazetted in Kegonga, Emuhaya, Maara and Tarakwa. | Revenue by Isuzu East Africa from the sale of 159 units of the Eliud Kipchoge Limited Edition D-Max pick-up. | Number of Nairobi households that could potentially be affected by the upcoming El-Nino flooding. |

## Quote of the Week

"If we do our arithmetic and find that Nairobi Senator Edwin Sifuna will send President William Ruto home early, so be it. And there is no problem, by the way, even I, Riggy G, can deputise Sifuna. There is nothing wrong with that."

**- DCP Leader Rigathi Gachagua**

# Kenya's next growth story may be about movement




Kenya's economy crossed a milestone in 2025, reaching Ksh 17.58 trillion in nominal value – its largest on record, and roughly fifteen times the size the economy was in 2003.

Growth has moderated somewhat, from a recent peak of 5.7 per cent in 2023 to 4.6 per cent in 2025, with the World Bank projecting a similar 4.7–5.0 per cent range through the medium term. Every sector recorded positive growth last year, and on paper, this is a healthy, broadly diversified economy.

Underneath that headline number, though, sits a stubborn inefficiency that rarely makes it into a campaign speech. Logistics costs in Kenya are estimated to consume around 30 per cent of GDP – roughly three times the 10–12 per cent typical of developed economies.

That is close to a trillion shillings a year in costs – fuel burned in traffic, delays at weighbridges, warehousing inefficiencies, trucks idling at the port – that add no value, and that a more efficient transport network could, in principle, claw back. This is the argument for treating movement, not just production, as Kenya's next growth story.

### Sector Quietly Pulling its Weight

Transportation and storage is already Kenya's second-largest economic sector by value, behind only agriculture. It contributed Sh2.08 trillion – 11.8 per cent of GDP – in 2025, growing 3.7 per cent in real terms, a performance the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics attributes directly to increased road and railway activity.

Quarterly data shows the sector's output climbing steadily through 2025, from roughly Sh268 billion to over Sh285 billion in a single quarter — a trajectory that predates the SGR extension and Rironi–Mau Summit works, meaning the corridor investments now underway are being layered onto a sector that was already expanding.

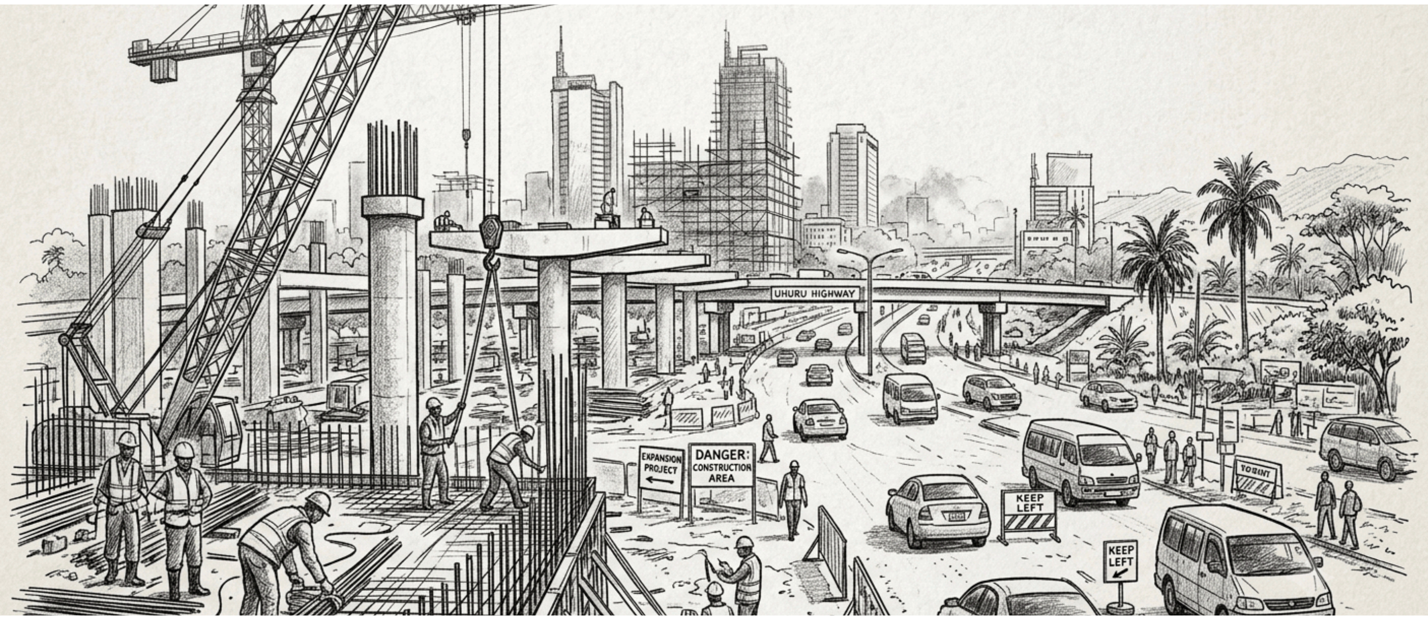
Academic research backs the intuitive case for why this matters. A 2026 study using nearly five decades of Kenyan time-series data found a one-directional relationship running from road and rail investment to GDP growth – meaning transport spending drives short-run economic output, not simply the reverse.

The same study found port infrastructure and GDP reinforce each other in both directions: better ports support growth, and growth in turn justifies further port investment. Put simply, this is not a contested theory. The data says movement moves the economy.

### What A Narrower Gap Could Look Like

If Kenya's logistics costs merely halved toward, say, 15–18 per cent of GDP, still well above developed-economy norms – the savings would not primarily show up as headline GDP growth.

They would show up as margin: in the price of maize moving from Nakuru to a Nairobi market, in the landed cost of a container arriving in Kampala via Mombasa, in whether a manufacturer in Kisumu can compete on price with one in Nairobi despite being three hundred kilometres further from the port.




This is the sense in which "growth" and "movement" are not separate stories. Kenya does not necessarily need to produce more milk, more cut flowers, more tea – sectors already driving much of its recorded growth — to become meaningfully richer. It may simply need to spend less getting what it already produces to a buyer.

The composition of GDP over the past decade and a half hints at why this matters more now than it once did. Manufacturing's share of the economy has fallen from 11.5 per cent in 2009 to 7.1 per cent in 2025 – the single largest compositional shift in Kenya's economy over that period.

Agriculture, by contrast, has grown from 18.3 per cent to 23.2 per cent of GDP over the same window. An economy leaning more heavily on agriculture and less on manufacturing is, almost by definition, an economy that depends more – not less – on efficient movement: farm to market, region to port, port to regional export destination.

A shilling saved in freight costs matters more to a tea smallholder in Kericho than it does to a factory that can absorb logistics costs into a longer, more forgiving value chain.

**The Counterweight**

None of this is free, and the growth case for movement cannot be separated from the financing case. The SGR extension and Rironi–Mau Summit corridor between them represent roughly a trillion shillings in new spending, arriving at a moment when the World Bank continues to flag Kenya as being at high risk of debt distress, and when fiscal consolidation – reducing the deficit, protecting debt sustainability — remains an explicit government commitment that new infrastructure borrowing sits awkwardly alongside.

The financing structures chosen for both projects – a securitised bond for the railway, a toll-funded public-private partnership for the road – are explicit attempts to avoid adding to Kenya's conventional external debt stock. Whether they succeed in doing so, or simply move the same fiscal risk into a different column of the ledger, is a question this magazine will keep returning to as the projects progress.

A corridor that cuts logistics costs by a meaningful margin pays for itself, eventually, in higher trade volumes and tax revenue. A corridor that under-delivers on utilisation while its toll and bond obligations still fall due does the opposite – and Kenya has, as the cover story in this issue notes, been in exactly that position with the original SGR before.

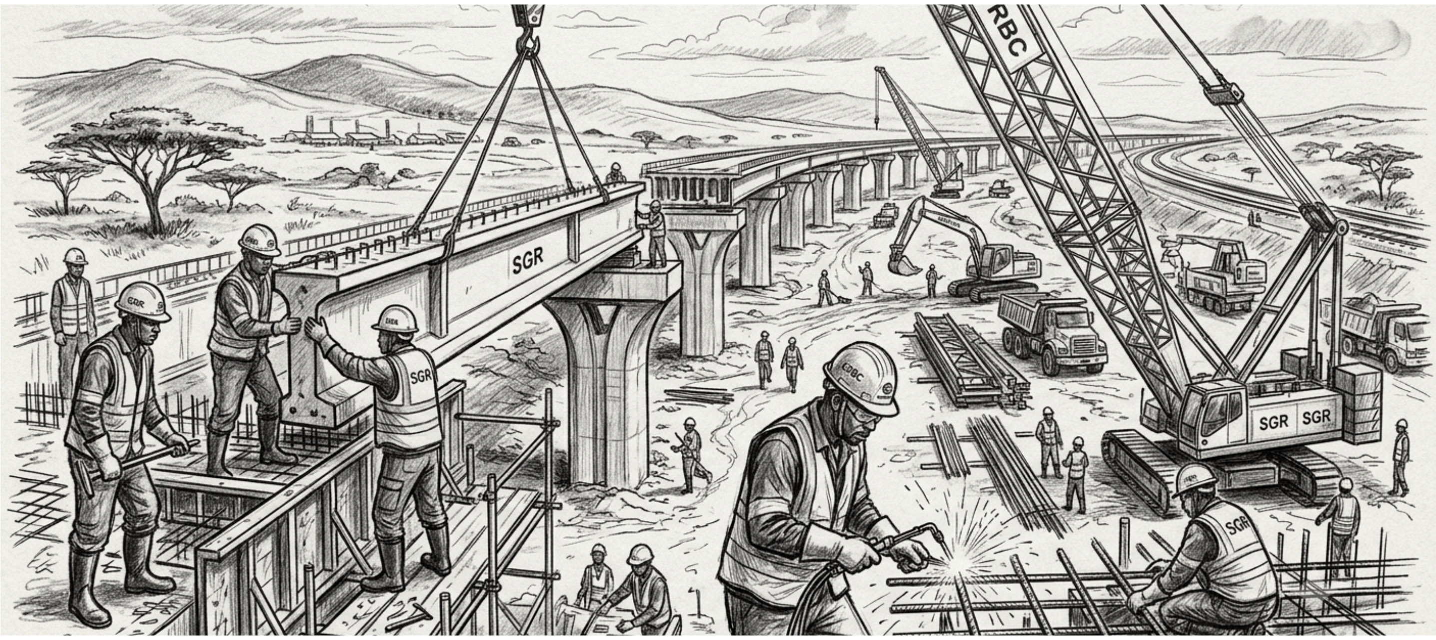
**The Story Worth Watching**

Kenya's growth story for much of the past two decades has been told sector by sector – agriculture up, financial services up, ICT up, manufacturing down. That framing is not wrong, but it can obscure a simpler, cross-cutting question: how much of what Kenya already produces is failing to reach its full value simply because of the cost of moving it.

Transport and storage's own steady climb up the GDP rankings suggests the sector already understands its growing importance, even if the political conversation around the SGR and the Northern Corridor has not fully caught up.

The single largest lever available for narrowing that gap is not a new crop, a new export product or a new industrial policy. It is exactly what is currently under construction between Naivasha and Malaba, and between Rironi and Mau Summit – provided Kenya can build the economic activity around the corridor as diligently as it is building it.

# What happens to Western Kenya when the railway arrives?




In 2017, Kisumu Port handled 4,300 tonnes of cargo in an entire year — a rounding error for a facility built to move freight across one of Africa's great lakes. By 2025, that figure had climbed to 459,601 tonnes.

In the first quarter of 2026, throughput reached 145,753 tonnes, up 46 per cent on the same period in 2025, and the Kenya Ports Authority expects the port to cross 700,000 tonnes by the end of the year.

This is happening ahead of the SGR extension that will eventually connect the port directly to the national railway network via an 8.69 KM branch line.

Kisumu's revival — quay length extended from 262 to 392 metres, dredging to deepen the berth, new cargo storage and a passenger terminal — has been underway for several years, financed and executed before the railway construction now underway even began. The port, in other words, got there first.

That timing matters for the question this issue keeps asking: whether Western Kenya will use new infrastructure to capture more economic value, or simply become a faster conduit for goods and value captured elsewhere.

**The Port As A Lead Indicator**

What is moving through Kisumu today offers a preview of what a fully connected corridor could carry. Officials attribute the port's growth to expanding trade with Uganda and Tanzania — cross-border commodity flows that have historically moved by road, at higher cost and lower reliability, and are now shifting onto the lake.

The most striking recent addition has been coal shipments originating in Songea, Tanzania, transiting through Kisumu for the first time — cargo that previously had no reason to touch Kenyan territory at all, now routed through a Kenyan port because it has become the more efficient option.

Kisumu is not being rebuilt in isolation. Kenya Ports Authority is developing thirteen feeder-port projects across the wider lake region. Homa Bay has completed its first phase; Mbita Bay and Sio Port in Busia County are roughly 54 per cent complete and due for commissioning by the end of September 2026, and construction at Usenge Port in Siaya County is expected to begin within months.

Officials describe the ambition plainly — integrating meter-gauge rail directly into the port yard, introducing dedicated oil wagons, and building what KPA calls a seamless multimodal system linking lake, road and rail.

If that integration succeeds, the SGR extension will not simply be adding a railway to a region that lacked one. It will be plugging into a lake-transport network that has already proven, independent of the railway, that demand for cheaper regional trade routes exists and is growing quickly.

**The Other Engine: Sugar**

Kisumu's port sits inside a region whose economy has long been built around a single, troubled crop. Sugarcane supports more than 300,000 smallholder farmers across Kakamega, Bungoma, Busia, Siaya and the wider Nyanza belt.

However, the industry spent decades defined by delayed payments, mismanaged state mills and factories that periodically ran out of mature cane.

That picture has shifted sharply in the past two years. Kenya produced a record 832,000 tonnes of sugar, and the government cleared roughly Sh117 billion in historical arrears owed to farmers and factory workers, alongside a further Sh2.5 billion injection to settle outstanding debts.

Four long-struggling state mills — Nzoia, Chemilil, Sony and Muhoroni — have since been leased to private operators for 30 years, with land and other underlying assets remaining under state ownership.

The results have shown up quickly: cumulative sugarcane deliveries reached 4.93 million tonnes in the first half of 2026 alone, including a record 998,010 tonnes delivered in June — the highest single-month figure in seven years. Sugar production for the first five months of 2026 rose nearly 22 per cent year-on-year, to 348,143 tonnes.

The infrastructure link here is direct rather than symbolic. The Kenya National Highways Authority is fast-tracking the Mamboleo–Muhoroni road specifically to connect the revived processing plants to national markets — a smaller, less politically visible project than the SGR extension, but one addressing the same underlying problem.

Whether the SGR extension complements this recovery or competes with it is an open question worth watching.

A railway optimised for bulk freight to Kisumu Port and onward to Uganda could, in principle, offer sugar producers a cheaper route to regional export markets than road transport currently allows — turning a domestic recovery story into a regional one.

Or the railway's economics may simply bypass agriculture in favour of higher-value containerised cargo, leaving the sugar belt to keep relying on roads like Mamboleo–Muhoroni for its day-to-day movement.

Which of these becomes true will depend on freight pricing and scheduling decisions that have not yet been made public.

**The Value-Capture Question**

This is where the caution raised elsewhere in this issue applies most directly to Western Kenya. Better transport can move raw sugarcane, raw fish, raw agricultural produce out of the region faster — or it can be the platform on which the region finally builds the processing, storage and manufacturing capacity to capture more value locally before goods leave at all.

The sugar sector's recovery has been driven as much by ownership reform, debt relief and pricing fixes as by transport — a reminder that infrastructure alone does not solve an industry's problems, but that removing the transport bottleneck becomes far more valuable once the underlying industry is functioning properly again.

# What does a connected Kenya feel like?


Every December, the same ritual repeats itself. Millions of Kenyans queue at Nairobi's bus termini to travel upcountry for Christmas, weddings, funerals and end-of-year holidays – and every December, matatu and bus fares surge to meet them, sometimes nearly tripling on most routes.

A trip to Kisumu that might cost Sh1,200–1,800 in an ordinary month has, in past holiday seasons, climbed past Sh3,000. The reason is straightforward market economics: demand explodes, vehicles are pulled off other routes to chase it, and operators – working in a sector with no binding fare-control mechanism – set prices on the spot according to crowd size.

This is what a disconnected Kenya feels like, in the most literal sense: a country where the ability to reach your own family depends on the week of the year, and where "going upcountry" is not a metaphor but a logistical event requiring planning, savings and, for many, a fare that has to be budgeted for months in advance.

Against that backdrop, it is worth asking plainly what the SGR extension and the Rironi–Mau Summit road are actually promising to change about ordinary life – not GDP, not freight tonnage, but the felt experience of moving through this country.

**The Journey, Today**

The road distance between Nairobi and Kisumu is roughly 334 kilometres. In good conditions, by bus, that is a six-to-six-and-a-half-hour trip. in practice, with traffic through Nakuru, roadworks and the Gilgil weighbridge, journeys routinely run longer.

Buses depart from Nairobi's CBD termini roughly every two to three hours outside peak season, more frequently during it, at fares that hover between Sh500 and Sh1,500 depending on operator and season - before the December surge multiplies them.

That six-hour baseline is the number this issue's infrastructure story is really promising to attack.

A completed Rironi–Mau Summit dual carriageway is expected to cut hours off the Nairobi–Nakuru–Mau Summit leg alone, according to government projections, by removing the single-carriageway bottlenecks, the Nakuru town crawl and the weighbridge congestion that currently eat up so much of the journey.

The SGR extension, once operational, offers a different kind of promise entirely: a scheduled, weather-independent alternative to the road for the stretch beyond Naivasha, of the kind Kenyans have not had available on this specific corridor before.

Neither project, it is worth being honest, promises to make the Nairobi–Kisumu journey short.

What they promise is to make it predictable, a meaningfully different thing for a traveller budgeting a trip home.

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**Predictabiliy Counts**

This is, perhaps, the most important distinction a Society page can add to an issue otherwise dominated by freight tonnage and GDP percentages: for the ordinary traveller, the value of infrastructure is rarely measured in hours saved.

It is measured in whether the same trip costs the same amount and takes the same time whether you are travelling in an ordinary week or the week before Christmas.

A rail or road corridor with genuine spare capacity – enough seats, enough carriages, enough lanes to absorb a holiday surge without matatu operators needing to strip other routes bare to meet it – would change something Kenyans have adapted to for decades without ever quite accepting as normal.

The fact that reaching family upcountry becomes measurably harder precisely when the need to do so, culturally and emotionally, is greatest.

There are early, imperfect signs that formal transport options already reduce this pressure somewhat.

The existing SGR's Nairobi–Mombasa passenger service has in past holiday periods sold out its December bookings well in advance – evidence of latent demand for a scheduled alternative to the informal matatu market on at least one Kenyan corridor already.

Whether the Naivasha–Kisumu extension replicates that pattern, giving Western Kenya travellers the same scheduled, fixed-fare option Coast-bound travellers have had for years, is one of the more human-scale tests this project faces – arguably a more meaningful one.

**Meaning To Traveller**

It is easy, writing about corridors and economic geography, to lose sight of what connection is ultimately for. Kenyans do not travel upcountry primarily to participate in an economic corridor.

They travel to bury relatives, attend weddings, sit with ageing parents, and be present for the obligations that hold extended families together across distance – obligations that do not pause because a bus fare has tripled or a matatu has been pulled off the route to chase a more lucrative holiday fare.

A connected Kenya, felt rather than measured, would be one where that obligation gets easier to meet rather than harder every December – where the same money and the same number of hours reliably gets a traveller from Nairobi to Kisumu in June as it does in the week before Christmas.

That is a far more modest promise than "economic transformation." It may also be the promise most likely to be judged, by the people actually riding these routes, as the one that mattered.

The 59th Passing-Out Parade for Administration Police Recruits at the National Police College in Embakasi, Nairobi.

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