



Vitu Kwa Ground ni Different! Anticipations, not Policy, Driving LAPSSET

By Ngala Chome



Last May, Kenya's president Uhuru Kenyatta [launched](#) the operations of the first berth of the new Lamu Port on Manda Bay. As the media focussed [attention](#) on a security glitch during the function, when a man attempted to approach the president on the dais, a group of local fishers were threatening to demonstrate on the streets of Lamu town. They were demanding full compensation in [cash](#) - US\$170 million, or KSh1.7 billion - that a four-judge bench sitting in the town of Malindi awarded them four years ago.

According to the Kenya Ports Authority (KPA) - which is in charge of the construction of the new port at Lamu - the demand for full compensation in cash is out of step with an agreement it had made with the fishers. The agreement, deposited at the High court, stipulates that only 65 per cent of the compensation would be made in cash, and that the remaining 35 per cent would be invested in equipment to support deep-sea fishing. The fishers now appear to be less interested in the fishing equipment. As a result, payment of their compensation has been delayed.

Such demands for full financial compensation, and others for the rationalisation of land ownership, including community involvement in project planning, have been ubiquitous across the entire Lamu Port and South-Sudan Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor since the project's inception in 2012.

The ambitious US\$25 billion LAPSSET corridor, when completed, will run from Lamu County on the Kenyan coast into Ethiopia and South-Sudan. It promises to develop infrastructure to connect a vast area covering northern Kenya, South Sudan, and southern Ethiopia with global markets. Initially driven by oil and mineral transport needs, planners hoped that the development would also boost agricultural investment, including building processing plants and distribution centres, and creating special economic zones and free trade areas. To boost agricultural production, the focus would be on setting up large plantations, nucleus farms, outgrower schemes, and large holding grounds for livestock.

Broadly, LAPSSET reflects the high-modernist impulses of its promoters (national politicians and bureaucrats), some of whom genuinely expect that their plans to transform Lamu and northern Kenya will attract the capital required to create a new modernizing force in the region. As a result, LAPSSET's framing of northern Kenya and Lamu as empty of civilized people and modernity, but full of resources, especially land and minerals, appears to be legitimating the appropriation of "underutilized" land, while casting the state and its elites as heroes who will make these regions anew.

What is important is that this type of rhetoric - accompanied by seductive images of the future of northern Kenya under LAPSSET - is generating real anticipations on the ground. In sum, LAPSSET's future direction is being negotiated and renegotiated in advance of any investments. The ubiquitous demands for financial compensation, rationalisation of land ownership, and community involvement in project planning, for example, are all part of a wider strategy to ensure that this large infrastructural project, with implications for the commercialisation of agriculture, comes to terms with local concerns and interests. It is through such demands that various local actors, including smallholder farmers, fishers and pastoralists, are seeking to direct the project in ways that better respond to local realities.

The promulgation of a new constitution in 2010, two-years before the LAPSSET project began, has promoted the voice of communities that will be affected. Together with the wider public ethos that accompanied the 2010 constitution, and which encourages respect for human rights and the importance of communal involvement in the policy-making process, the space needed for members of the public to petition important government projects that affect their lives has been expanded.

While information asymmetries continue to cause confusion and suspicion, civil society organisations along the corridor are demanding comprehensive social and environmental impact assessment studies be conducted, with communal consultation and other safeguards. It is these anticipations of the prosperous future that LAPSSET is promising, and which are intensified by information asymmetries that cause confusion and panic, that will influence the overall, future direction of LAPSSET - in ways that were not necessarily anticipated at the policy-design stage.

A central narrative driving the activist agenda around LAPSSET in Lamu is that information about the project is not forthcoming. Demands for information have variously been made through petitions addressed to concerned authorities, street demonstrations and court cases. A petition citing concerns over communal safeguards, community consultation, environmental protection, and the fate of customary natural resource management led to the formation of the LAPSSET Steering Committee, which brought together LAPSSET officials and local activists, smallholder farmers, women, youth, Beach Management Unit (BMU) managers and local religious leaders. However, after receiving official recognition on 2 March 2012, the steering committee was dissolved after six months due to political wrangling at county-government level.

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Following the dissolution of the committee, the political environment has become fraught, with multiple actors struggling to overturn and control certain aspects of LAPSSET in ways that will advance their competing interests. In some instances, LAPSSET managers have made unilateral decisions without consultation, especially regarding land acquisition for key components of the corridor. This has affected the swift implementation of LAPSSET, as people resort to taking their grievances to the High Court, and communal protests against LAPSSET and its associated projects in Lamu have become more frequent.

Apart from the lack of information, communities are concerned with how their local cultures and livelihoods will be respected and protected, especially in relation to access to Lamu's ecological diversity and the management and stewardship of "indigenous" territories and areas in line with customary laws, values and decision-making processes. Local conservationists have deployed multidimensional traditional knowledge systems transmitted culturally through generations, which they argue provide a better understanding of local and interconnected patterns and processes over large spatial and temporal scales, such as turbidity on the sea caused by port dredging; cycles of resource availability within forests and coral reefs; and shifts in climate or ecosystem structure and function. The Bajuni fishers living on the islands of the Lamu archipelago are worried that the port risks destroying Lamu's ecological diversity, and with it, the livelihoods of its residents. Therefore, activists have pressed LAPSSET decision-makers to pay attention to environmental conservation and human rights, and respect existing livelihoods and culture.

Lamu communities are also looking towards other possible opportunities, such as higher investment in public education and scholarship opportunities for locals so that they can become skilled in, for example, port and related operations, with the prospect of future employment. Farmers' groups are also expecting compensation for their land and other natural resources based on a precedent set in 2015 when 300 smallholders were compensated for their plots at Kililana (now within the port area). However, local opinion is divided as some groups focus on the long-term consequences of LAPSSET on land, smallholder farming and fisheries, while others focus on immediate benefits.

Research has shown that when such mega-infrastructure projects as LAPSSET hit the ground, they interact with social groups within the state and in society that are differentiated along lines of class, gender, generation, ethnicity and nationality, and that have historically specific expectations, aspirations and traditions of struggle. It is these dynamics that produce diverse responses involving a diverse set of actors, with different consequences. A useful summation may be found in a new Kenyan adage, *vitu kwa ground ni different!* Things on the ground are different (from what you may think!).

Despite the recent pompous launch of the Lamu port - a key component of the wider LAPSSET corridor - the project is experiencing difficulties because the infrastructure was mainly intended to improve petroleum transport but falling petroleum prices, conflict in South Sudan, and Uganda's decision to transport oil through Tanzania, and not Kenya, will continue to cause delays in implementation. Despite such complications to the realisation of LAPSSET, it can be observed that for a place like Lamu, the mere existence of the project, even on paper, has produced real material effects on the ground, where LAPSSET is influencing, and in turn being influenced by local political, economic and social processes, or simply, the realities of rural Africa.

Take land-use change. Since at least the 1990s, there has been increased sedentarization and intensification of land-use in Lamu County, occasioned by the spread of rain-fed agriculture, increased migration into the county, and perhaps following this, the spread of communal

conservation efforts such as the establishment of ranches and conservancies. Coupled with the need for allocation of land to LAPSSET project activities, such increasing demands for land in Lamu are driving wider calls for the rationalisation of land ownership, related to a nervous politics of belonging, where renewed meanings of land as property, driven by the anticipations of LAPSSET, are conflicting with meanings of land as a cultural resource, or as ethnic territory.

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The idea of land as ethnic territory constitutes a widespread ideology in Kenya, where land is inexorably linked with ethnic identity, ideas of citizenship are informed by ethnicity, and land and ethnicity have both influenced the politics of redistribution. In the context of increasing competition for land and resources in Lamu, prominence has been given to exclusivist notions of belonging and citizenship – where commonplace terms such as *wageni* (“guests” or “migrant” communities) and *wenyeji* (“hosts” or “indigenous” communities), are being cast in a new light, as individuals and groups anticipate LAPSSET’s prosperous future.

In addition, civic engagement about LAPSSET has raised key questions about the control and ownership of the proposed corridor, including who benefits. LAPSSET managers and local politicians should pay attention to the often exclusivist nature of local politics because local divisions in terms of expectation and resource distribution may drive conflict between and amongst people of different ethnicities and political orientation, most of whom are smallholder farmers and fishers. Smallholder farmers and fishers are concerned that if they do not influence the future direction of LAPSSET, especially regarding access to land, seascape, and markets, integration to value chains will not automatically accrue benefits to them. While public communal narratives have embraced concepts like consultation, inclusivity, and participation, it is unclear if these ideals will be practised in the future, when investors begin engaging with the upstream segments of the anticipated value chains.

Despite an active civil society space in Lamu, information asymmetries regarding LAPSSET persist, causing confusion, misinformation, and suspicion. This is why local activists, smallholder farmers, and recently fishers, are focussing their attention on issues that pose a direct threat to existing livelihoods, including those that promise immediate benefits such as financial compensation for land and resources claimed by the infrastructural developments.

Way forward

To achieve the LAPSSET vision, it is essential to include the vision of local actors by making more informed choices, taking more effective action, and influencing the nature of the anticipated value chains. Quotas should be created for the participation of smallholder farmers and fishers in the LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority (LCDA), for example, by including respectable smallholder and fisher associations and land rights groups. The LCDA should collaborate with the Pastoralists Parliamentary Group to develop proposals for value-chains that will not exclude the interests of pastoralists.

Lastly, LAPSSET Steering Committees should be established in the counties that will be traversed by the corridor. They will provide a much-needed channel of communication between local communities and LAPSSET managers to help project managers and community representatives address information asymmetries in order to reduce the need to resort to the courts, street demonstrations, and state harassment of local activists.

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