

Coast makeover will be Uhuru's most noticeable, lasting legacy

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After filing out of the Likoni Ferry crossing, something is quite noticeable to any past visitor to the South Coast. Jostling for attention with political campaign posters is a facelift on shops and residential houses. It is as if the owners stumbled on a treasure of white rock. Stitched together with a grey thread of cement, the spectacle is easy to the eye. Rows and rows of houses lining the main road have been redone with white rock.

The sprawl of mud-walled houses is giving way to something new. And the "before and after" is quite visible even to the naked eye - mud houses stand cheek by jowl with the new ones in different stages of construction: There are single units, bungalows, mansions and two-storeyed houses.

What explains the sudden burst of investment in permanent houses made of coral rock? A windfall from the political season, perhaps? The improbable answer is in necessity, invention and innovation. Yet there is also something else.

The houses are built astride the new road linking the North with the South Coast. And so the swanky new houses complete what will be the total remake of the South Coast.

On a tour last week with the Embassy of Japan officials and JICA, I discovered Mombasa's best kept secret - the Mombasa Port and Road Development Project an infrastructural outlay by the Japanese and Ken-

yan government that started in 2016. Long the mainstay of the Coast economy, the port area is changing rapidly. Once complete (in 2027), the transformation will propel the entire North and South Coast into the realms of big cities served by a collection of world class infrastructure from the water, land and air. A boost that will surely change the region from an inward-looking region to take its place in the national economy.

If nothing else, the makeover - a huge social investment - will be President Uhuru Kenyatta's most noticeable and lasting legacy anywhere else in the country.

The Dongo Kundu Special Economic Zone (DKSEZ) sitting on 3,000 acres of land will be a logistics and manufacturing hub. It includes a free port, a free trade zone, an industrial park, a tourism park and a residential zone served by a new port (handling more than one million TEUs currently), a new by-pass road (the engineering marvel that is the 26km Mombasa Southern By-pass with two bridges and a viaduct), a remade airport, the SGR, an power plant and a water and sewerage treatment point. The cost of the remake is nearly Sh40 billion, Sh25 billion less than the initial cost of the Nairobi Expressway. The massive project includes burrowing through hard rock, laying bridges over deep water and marshy land and levelling ridges and valleys without destroying the natural habitat of mangrove trees.

There is so much to be had in such targeted investment. The DKSEZ (there are 15 other special economic zones across the country), forecast to attract Sh200 billion investment, is estimated to generate at least 100,000 direct jobs and boost the fledgling tourism industry. Its potential is in ushering the Coast away from labour-intensive and commodity, agriculture-based activi-

ties to more technology-based, value-add productivity.

This is not reinventing the wheel as it were; by streamlining export and import at the country's seaport, President Jose Maria Figueres transformed Costa Rica from a banana republic of 14 million to one of the most developed countries in the Caribbean in under a decade between 1994-1998. He did that by building a cluster in electronics and Information Technology. He lured American technology giant Intel to construct its Assembly and Testing Plant in Costa Rica that led to the injection of between \$300-500 million into the economy.

To sway the Intel executives, Costa Rica put in place strategic social investments (roads and ICT infrastructure, macroeconomic stability, a good customs system, a competitive economy and an efficient financial system).

Many will admit that in development and progress, there are many moving parts. Besides having a visionary leader in Figueres, Costa Rica enjoyed political stability, its courts were reputed for their independence and integrity. Its health system was among the best in Latin America and they had a well-educated, skilled human capital.

The coral stone was there for ages. No one just took the trouble to make good use of it or helped the locals think of ways to benefit them, until 2022. The DKSEZ will need an enabler to give it wings. Without that, it will lie there, unutilised, another white elephant.

The next elections (in August) offer the locals in Mombasa a chance to break with the past and relish in new possibilities.

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