

EMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

Employment in the Kenya Coast first expanded from the twelfth century onwards with the rise of Swahili civilisation that offered many trade and building activities. Over time, there was a rising demand for domestics, porters and plantation workers. Wage employment and self-employment in small-scale businesses rapidly increased after the abolition of slavery in 1907. The colonial period was, nevertheless, generally characterised by a sluggish response of the local labour force and repeated labour unrest. Poor employment conditions resulted in a low productivity of a work force strongly under traditional cultural influence. Wage employment more than doubled in the post-independence period with growth remaining near the national average. The coastal share of national wage employment is currently above its share of the national population. Employment is mostly concentrated in the coastal towns with a predominance of Mombasa. Moreover, most jobs are found in the service sector since the region is heavily dependent on tourism, commerce, transport and communication. The review ends with brief descriptions of the current sectoral characteristics, the informal sector, unemployment and the degree of women participation.

INTRODUCTION

This review provides a broad overview of employment issues on the Kenya Coast during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence periods. The nature of and changes in employment as well as the people's attitude towards wage employment are discussed. The analysis includes trends in wage and non-wage employment; the share of the region in national employment and changes over time; the sectoral composition of employment; the dominance of the urban centres, especially Mombasa; the competition for job opportunities between migrants from other parts of the country and the indigenous people; and the changing demand and supply conditions in the labour market.

THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

Employment outside traditional agriculture can be traced many centuries back. East Africa received traders from distant places like Egypt, the Middle East and India as early as 500 BC (Reusch 1954). The pharaohs of Egypt were sending expeditions to the region even before the reign of King Solomon, looking for precious minerals like incense and gold as well as ivory, ebony, leopard skins and monkeys. Written records show that Indian and Chinese traders were visiting the East African coast around the seventh century A.D. in search of ivory, leopard skins, slaves and gold and other trade items. These traders from far-away countries probably had limited knowledge of the interior of East Africa and employed coastal people as porters, guides and for other chores.

Employment at the Coast seems to have experienced a major expansion with the development of Swahili civilisation between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries. Unlike other local communities, the Swahili were not strongly rooted in traditional agriculture and depended mostly on trading activities. They had started trading with Persians, Chinese and other foreigners as early as the twelfth century. These traders later became involved in slave trade which emerged as the main source of employment for coastal people, being porters, domestic servants, sailors, artisans, guards, workers in cottage industries and farm workers (UNESCO 1981a).

Before the coming of the Europeans the local communities participated in three major economic activities: farming, fishing and other forms of harvesting sea food, and trading. The former two activities were the prerogative of the indigenous communities while the Swahili were mainly involved in trading and other service activities. Many activities revolved around the Indian Ocean which provided fish and sea foods, pearls, shells, turtle shells and amber for commercial purposes. Fish was used for domestic consumption as well as a source of income while shells were used to make a range of useful items. Navigation and maritime economic activities resulted from the acquired fishing experience and later led to the new industry of boat-building as well as improvement of sea fishing techniques. In addition, there was some limited cottage industry in the area. Some of the earliest manufacturing activities were spinning, weaving and production of clay spindles, which, however, engaged only a small proportion of the labour force. Most of the indigenous people earned their living mainly from small-scale agriculture.

Commercial activities at the coast between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries stimulated urbanisation as reflected in the growth of towns such as Lamu, Kilwa, Manda, Malindi, Mombasa and Pate. Most of the non-agricultural economic activities and trade with the Middle East, the Far East and Europe, at the time, were concentrated in these urban centres. Malindi, for instance, became well known for its iron smelting and as an export centre for iron products, fish, leopard skins and ivory. The process of urbanisation also facilitated the growth of a maritime trade which became an important source of employment opportunities. The supply of foreign goods and services with increasing maritime contacts and trade enhanced the diversity of economic activities. Geographically, the coastal region was well placed for foreign trade, notably in terms of the monsoon winds which were then the most important factor in ocean transport between East Africa, India and the Middle East. Employment of caravaners and porters also gained

prominence between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries since caravans were the most important modes of land transportation and communication. People employed in these caravans carried goods on their heads and backs to Mombasa, Malindi and other trading centres.

One of the sectors whose growth directly resulted from urbanisation was building and construction. Urbanisation introduced new tastes and standards in housing. Stone buildings became widespread in the urban settlements, making their construction more labour-intensive and an important source of employment. For instance, the construction of Fort Jesus between 1593 and 1594 by masons from India and supervised by Italian architects, employed a large number of people, especially from Malindi. By the end of the eighteenth century, there was a high demand for domestic labour within and outside the region. Labour was also increasingly required on the plantations that had been established in the region. The Omanis, for example, had introduced clove plantations in 1818 and this raised the demand for cooks and other domestic servants on these plantations.

Due to the rising demand for labour and the reluctance of the local population to offer their service willingly, some of the plantation owners resorted to forced labour of men, women as well as children (Harris 1977). The demand for labour further increased during the nineteenth century as a result of a decline in the volumes of slaves, particularly after the intensification of the efforts by the U.S.A. and Britain to abolish the slave trade in West Africa. The abolition of slavery in 1907 was accompanied by rapid expansion of wage employment and self-employment in small-scale businesses. In addition to the employment opportunities at the plantations of the Imperial British East African Company (IBEAC) increasing numbers of people were employed as weavers, tailors and stevedores.

One of the rapidly growing sectors was that of construction and building, at first concentrated on the island of Mombasa. Within a short time after their arrival in East Africa, Asians had started workshops which provided employment to a large number of people (Harris 1977). Also, boat building activities were started, soon followed by maintenance workshops. Boats provided the only regular means of transport between the islands along the coast. With increasing investment in the communication infrastructure, workers' mobility was improved, widening the opportunities of wage employment in the modern sector. By the 1880s, people from Bura in the Taita Hills were seeking wage employment at the coast while some runaway slaves were working on the railway, road building and other projects (UNESCO 1981b).

In addition to supplying porters, the Taita also supplied other forms of labour. For instance, 500 to 600 of them worked for IBEAC in 1897, attracted by the relatively high wages which the company was paying. Porterage was one of the popular professions among the local people. The demand for porters was at that time higher than supply, which enabled porters to request relatively high wages and other benefits. It was through the porterage services that cash payment in return for manual labour was introduced.

Increasing demand for a further range of services in the second half of the nineteenth century led to the establishment of hospitals, banks and printing presses which in turn accelerated the diversification of employment opportunities. The first hospital and the

first bank were established by 1885 while the first printing press was established in 1887 – mainly printing religious and educational materials. IBEA which had its headquarters in Mombasa between 1888 and 1895, played an important role in the expansion of modern wage employment.

THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The Kenya-Uganda Railway marked the end of portage service at the coast. The railway company became a major employer of workers in technical fields such as fitters, turners, machine operators, and repair and maintenance crews. The railway line was instrumental in making the port of Mombasa the major centre of maritime transportation within and outside Kenya. A number of industries including tile and brick making, cotton ginning, aerated water factories, coffee drying and processing of hides and skins started to emerge not only at the coast, but in other parts of the country as well.

During the construction of the railway line between 1896 and 1901, many Asian workers were recruited because of their experience in construction work. Nevertheless, in the early decades of the twentieth century about 90% of all coastal employees were Africans, the Asians accounted for most of the remaining 10%. Nearly 40% of the employed African males were engaged in agricultural activities, particularly on large farms.

Stereotypes about the attitudes of the coastal people with regard to modern employment have been widespread in both the colonial and post-colonial periods. One view was that a large proportion of the indigenous people had negative attitudes towards wage employment. This view was particularly strong during the early colonial period – one common argument being that coastal people had poor working relations with Europeans. Also, that most of the workers were not willing to leave their homes for wages in a strange and in most cases less congenial, environment on the European farms or government labour camps (Ainsworth 1919). Labour productivity among the coastal people was considered to be generally low; they preferred village life rather than town life. Coastal employers became dependent on workers from elsewhere: Kamba, Kikuyu, Meru and Luo. Still, it was not clearly established whether the low labour productivity was due to inherently negative attitudes of the people or to the poor and discriminatory terms under which they worked. Available records, however, strongly point to the latter. Worker conditions, especially in Mombasa, were hard with low wages and living conditions characterised by poor health and sanitation conditions. Housing problems were largely ignored by government and employers. At the same time, there was considerable racial discrimination, whereby Asian workers received wages often three times higher than those of African workers for the same type of work (Clayton & Savage 1974). Furthermore, most employers did not provide housing facilities for their workers despite the fact that regulations were in existence. African workers regarded their workloads excessive. For instance, workers of Gazi Sisal Estate staged a demonstration to protest to that effect (Clayton & Savage 1974).

Following pressure by European employers, the colonial government took a number of

measures to encourage and even force Africans to seek wage employment. One was a legislative measure which required African workers to carry passes. This was intended to control the movements of African workers since there were widespread complaints that African workers were unreliable and tended to leave their employment without notice. Another measure was the introduction of taxes for Africans, partly meant to make them seek wage employment; reduction of land available to the African population was expected to have the same effect. However, the indigenous labour force did not respond positively enough or in insufficient numbers to satisfy the demand for unskilled labour because no attempt was made to address the root causes, notably the low wages, the poor working conditions and the racial discrimination in employment.

As a result, a number of labour strikes took place at the Coast. The colonial government established a tribunal which recommended an increase in wages to Ksh.10, half of which was to be paid in kind and the other half in cash (Clayton & Savage 1974). In addition, price and rent controls were instituted and government-owned shops were established to serve the workers. The latter measures were meant to protect the purchasing power of workers deemed essential in reducing labour unrest and demands for wage increases.

Still, early last century, the average wage rate in the coastal region was higher than in many other parts of the country. At the time of the First World War, the average wage was about RS.10/month¹ compared for instance with RS.4-5/month in the Highlands and RS.7-8 in Nyanza. Domestic servants at the coast earned between RS.10-25, while sweepers and water carriers were paid RS.10 together with a ration of maize meal and occasional meat or vegetables. Artisans received an average wage of RS.20-30 per month (Ogot 1975). These higher wages encouraged migration from the interior to the coast in general and Mombasa in particular. Casual labourers were also better paid than their counterparts elsewhere, earning RS.1.25-1.50 per day in the period 1912-15. The average daily wage rate went up to RS.2.55 per day between 1918 and 1919 which remained until 1934 when attempts were made to reduce it to RS.1.50 per day (Clayton & Savage 1974). A large percentage of the workers was paid on a daily basis, partly because most of the jobs in the region consisted of casual work at the port.

Starting in 1939 there was a series of strikes and disturbances in Mombasa. Again, the main causes were the treatment of workers and poor living conditions (Clayton & Savage 1974). Following the strikes, a Tribunal was formed to establish the causes and make recommendations on how to improve the wages. The minimum wage was to be raised to Ksh.20/month and a labour officer appointed to deal with the general problems facing the workers (Kenya 1948). In the period after 1940, African workers attempted to strengthen their trade unions to attain further improvements in their terms of employment. By the time of the struggle for independence the coastal trade unions had become a highly vocal movement.

1 The Indian Rupee was widely used in East Africa during this period.

Table 1 Distribution of employment by district, 1970-1995

	1970		1975		1980		1985		1990		1995	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Mombasa	61,492	71.0	70,906	69.6	94,761	68.1	101,027	67.3	122,253	68.8	147,875	76.0
Kilifi	7,382	8.5	11,773	11.6	15,619	11.2	18,828	12.5	21,491	12.1	16,377	8.4
Kwale	6,718	7.8	7,841	7.7	11,616	8.3	121,041	8.1	13,799	7.8	10,072	5.2
Lamu	868	1.0	1,262	1.2	239	1.7	2,638	1.8	3,394	1.9	3,587	1.8
Tana River	1,080	1.3	1,605	1.6	2,426	1.7	3,147	2.1	3,042	1.7	4,248	2.2
Taita Taveta	9,034	10.4	8,426	8.3	12,426	8.9	12,305	8.2	13,699	7.7	12,356	6.4
Total (Coast)	86,574	100	101,813	100	139,245	100	150,049	100	177,678	100	194,515	100
Employment share*		13.4		12.4		13.8		12.8		12.0		12.5

* Share of Coast in national employment

Source: Kenya 1971; 1976; 1981; 1986; 1991; 1996

Table 2 Distribution of earnings by district, 1970 - 1995 (K£)*

	1970		1975		1980		1985		1990		1995	
	K£'000	%	K£'000	%	K£'000	%	K£'000	%	K£'000	%	K£'000	%
Mombasa	18,531	81.0	35,705	82.0	72,866	80.6	122,096	77.1	273,517	77.3	465,221	69.4
Kilifi	1,181	5.2	2,998	6.9	5,297	5.9	13,489	8.5	33,171	9.4	84,714	12.6
Kwale	1,384	6.1	1,753	4.0	5,601	6.1	9,261	5.8	21,429	6.1	60,026	8.9
Lamu	165	0.7	451	1.0	1,234	1.4	2,482	1.6	4,782	1.4	14,727	2.2
Tana River	212	0.9	498	1.1	1,370	1.5	2,757	1.7	3,975	1.1	12,690	1.9
Taita Taveta	1,400	6.1	2,148	4.9	4,018	4.4	8,259	5.2	16,875	4.8	33,423	5.0
Total (Coast)	22,873	100	43,553	100	90,386	100	158,344	100	353,749	100	670,801	100
Earnings share**		14.1		13.9		13.8		13.0		15.0		12.9

* 1 K£ = 20Sh; 1 K£ = 0.33 US\$ (1997)

** Share of Coast in national earnings

Source: Kenya 1971; 1976; 1981; 1986; 1991; 1996

POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Between 1970 and 1995, wage employment in Coast Province more than doubled from about 87,000 to 195,000 people although the share in national employment declined from 13.4% to 12.5% during this period (Table 1). This is an indication that the growth of coastal employment opportunities was slightly below the national average.

During the colonial and post-colonial periods, Mombasa continued to dominate wage employment in the province. For most of the post-colonial period up to 1990, Mombasa accounted for about 70% of wage employment. Kilifi District accounted for about 10-13%, while Taita Taveta District saw its share gradually decline from about 10% (1970) to 5.6% (1995). Lamu and Tana River Districts have low levels of wage employment, each accounting for about 2% of the total wage employment in the province for most of the period. The dominant role of Mombasa is also reflected in the distribution of earnings. For the period 1970-1990, the share of Mombasa of all wage earnings in the region ranged between 77% and 82% (Table 2). The fact that the share of earnings of Mombasa was higher than its share of wage employment during this period points at a greater proportion of higher salaried jobs or higher average wages compared with other coastal districts or both. This pattern could still be seen in 1994, but not in 1995 (Tables 1 and 2): Mombasa's share in wage employment was higher than ever, but its share in wage earnings had gone down to a level lower than its employment share, indicating that wages in Mombasa stagnated.

Wage employment is largely and increasingly concentrated in the towns, the percentage growing from 69.9% in 1970 to 84.3% in 1995. While the share of Mombasa town in urban wage employment showed a slow but gradual decline during these 25 years, the town still accounted for 88% of urban wage employment at the coast (Kenya 1996a). Table 3 gives figures on employment and population in the coastal districts. The special position of Mombasa is shown by the fact that its recent share of coastal population was only 25% while its share of recorded wage employment in the region was about 70%. All other districts show the reverse pattern.

Table 3 Distribution of population and wage employment, 1979 and 1989 (%)

	1979		1989	
	Population	Wage Employment	Population	Wage Employment
Kilifi	32.1	10.8	33.0	11.7
Lamu	3.2	1.8	3.1	1.9
Taita-Taveta	11.0	8.4	10.9	7.5
Kwale	21.5	7.2	20.8	7.6
Mombasa	25.4	70.2	25.2	69.5
Tana River	6.8	1.6	7.0	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
National share	8.8	13.6	8.6	12.5

Source: Kenya 1981; 1991

The coastal share of wage employment has been considerably above its share of the national population. The region's share of population was almost 9% in 1979 and 1989, but the share of national employment was 13.6% and 12.5% respectively (Table 3). This

is mainly due to Mombasa being the second largest town and the second most important industrial centre in the country after Nairobi. This, coupled with the fact that it is the main port of East Africa, makes Mombasa an important source of employment in the manufacturing and service sectors, particularly the latter.

SECTORAL CHARACTERISTICS

Current sectoral composition

The sectoral composition of urban wage employment mainly reflects the economy of Mombasa, especially in transport and communication, manufacturing, commerce, tourism and other services. Transport and communication as a sector accounted for more than a quarter of total wage employment in the 1970s (Table 4). However, the share had declined to about 19% by the mid-1990s as economic activities in the province diversified. With a share of 31.7% in 1995, the community, social and personal services sector continued to occupy the number one position. The manufacturing sector held the third position throughout the period, with a constant share of around 19%. The finance, insurance, real estates and business sector had its proportion of wage employment in coastal towns triple from 2.7% in 1972 to 8.1% in 1995. Finally, employment in wholesale and retail, restaurants and hotels also showed a gradual increase during the period, reflecting the important role of both domestic and international tourism in the area. In all six reference years, employment in the (formal) services sector remained dominant, the percentage fluctuating between 70% and 75%. This also reflects the low level of industrialisation in the region.

Informal sector

The informal sector has emerged as an alternative source of employment. Due to a less restrictive environment than Nairobi and other up-country towns, Mombasa already had an estimated 35% of its job opportunities arising from the informal sector in the late 1960s. In the smaller towns like Malindi the informal sector was even more significant constituting as much as 50% of new jobs (ILO 1972).

The importance of the informal sector is partly due to the limited opportunities in the formal sector. The latest district plans show that by the mid-1990s, only an estimated 10-15% of the labour force were engaged in modern sector wage employment. In the rural areas, the major source of employment continues to be small-scale agriculture, followed by small-scale enterprises engaged in retail trade, fishing, furniture making, hawking, handicrafts and boat-building. In recent years, women groups in all the coastal districts have initiated projects especially in handicrafts, food kiosks, rental houses, sewing and tailoring and horticultural production.

For most of the rural areas, agriculture continues to engage between 70% and 80% of the labour force, largely in self-employment. The agricultural potential in the area has been limited, however, because a large part of the region is arid or semi-arid. The proposed expansion of irrigation capacity, especially in the Tana Delta, was expected to raise the potential for wage employment in agriculture and other agro-based activities.

Table 4 Employment by industrial sector in major towns, 1970-1995

	1970		1975		1980		1985		1990		1995	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Agriculture & Forestry	901	1.3	1,043	1.4	1,241	1.3	2,217	2.1	2,093	1.6	2,476	1.6
Mining & Quarrying	658	1.0	391	0.5	397	0.4	846	0.8	1,587	1.2	2,187	1.4
Manufacturing	12,973	19.1	13,538	18.1	19,744	19.9	20,135	18.7	25,234	19.6	29,917	19.4
Electricity & Water	1,251	1.9	831	1.1	1,807	1.8	2,102	2.0	2,294	1.8	1,315	0.9
Construction	3,076	4.6	2,960	4.0	4,624	4.7	4,340	4.0	5,875	4.6	6,254	4.0
Wholesale & Retail, Restaurants & Hotels	6,826	10.1	8,574	11.5	11,919	12.0	14,103	13.1	18,423	14.3	21,682	14.0
Transport & Communication	20,473	30.4	19,510	26.1	24,610	24.8	21,185	19.7	24,451	19.0	29,249	18.9
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate & Business	1,831	2.7	2,739	3.7	7,282	7.4	7,801	7.3	9,362	7.3	12,443	8.1
Community, Social & Personal Services	19,390	28.8	25,092	33.6	27,417	27.7	34,689	32.3	39,603	30.7	48,905	31.7
Total	67,382	100	74,678	100	99,041	100	107,418	100	128,922	100	154,428	100

Source: Kenya. 1971; 1976; 1981; 1986; 1991; 1996

Unemployment

Nevertheless, Coast Province suffers from high levels of unemployment. Like elsewhere in the country, new job opportunities are few relative to the growth of the labour force. In 1969, for instance, recorded employment was one-third of the labour force in the country (ILO 1972). By the end of the 1960s, Mombasa had a higher level of unemployment than either Nairobi or Kisumu – unemployed heads of household in Mombasa being twice the number in Nairobi (9.8 and 4.2%, respectively). Among married women, unemployment in Mombasa was also higher than in Nairobi, 85% and 78%, respectively (ILO 1972). By 1994, the number of newly created jobs in the country was only about one-fifth of the new entrants to the labour market, estimated at about 500,000 people annually (Kenya 1995).

Women participation in wage employment

Women participation in wage employment at the coast remains low. This is partly due to the influence of Muslim culture which discourages female participation in economic activities outside the family. However, among immigrants from other areas, the participation of women is significant. With increasing education and awareness of gender equity, women participation in wage employment is rapidly rising. Before 1945, women were not allowed to participate in jobs outside their households. Men were the sole bread winners for most of the households, which adversely affected the ability of coastal families to save and invest (Stitcher 1975). However, there was a significant change after the Second World War; a change that accelerated in the post-independence period as educational opportunities for women improved. Up to the end of the 1970s (when national wage employment data by sex was available) it is clear that the share of women in wage employment in the Coast as a whole and in individual districts was rapidly rising from year to year. For instance, the proportional share of women in total wage employment rose from 7.2% in 1968 to 9.3% in 1970. In 1989, female wage earners were estimated at 17% compared with a male employment rate of 49%. The female rate in Coast Province was close to the national rate of 18% (Kenya 1996a).

CONCLUSION

The evolution of wage employment in the coastal region provides an interesting account of the creation of a modern work force from a population which is still strongly under traditional cultural influence. During the early stages of colonial rule, labour supply was largely inadequate due to negative work attitudes, low wages and poor working conditions. The colonial government sometimes had to use coercive measures including taxation and forced labour to meet the demand for labour from settler farms and other economic sectors. This situation, however, changed considerably with population growth, the influx of people from other parts of the country and rising levels of education which increased labour supply .

One feature of modern wage employment in the coastal areas is the large share of the tertiary or service sector in formal employment. The leading service sectors are commu-

nity, social and personal services which account for about a third of the total; transport and communication; and wholesale, retail, restaurants and hotels. The dominance of the service sector is a reflection of the fact that the region continues to be heavily dependent on tourism, commerce, transport and communication and related activities. Mombasa continues to take a dominant position in all respects. It overshadows all other districts and accounts for about 70% of total wage employment and about 90% of the urban wage employment in the region.

As the twentieth century draws to an end, the coastal region faces the challenge of creating adequate employment opportunities to reduce the increasing level of unemployment and underemployment and to raise both the productivity and participation rates of male and female workers. The coast will also have to diversify the local economy further, especially developing the manufacturing sector, in order to reduce the dependence on service sectors, some of which are highly vulnerable to adverse external as well as internal factors, as the turmoil of August 1997 convincingly showed.

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REVIEW DETAILS

Source

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