



**S**amia Omar was born and raised in Lamu County, Kenya, a nature lover's paradise at the uppermost corner of the country's coastline, which borders Somalia. She attended college in the U.S. and Canada and traveled to northwest Kenya for work. But, she says, "I always knew I had to go back."

In 2015, Omar began her dream job as county executive for trade and culture on the Lamu County Executive Council. Her work to boost the tourism industry and local economy involved activities such as planning the eclectic mix of festivals—including the Maulid festival celebrating the birth of the

# CASHING IN ON COAL: KENYA'S UNNECESSARY POWER PLANT

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Prophet Muhammad and the whimsical Shela Hat festival—for which the area is known. But after only two years and just shy of her 32nd birthday, Omar quit.

The Kenyan government had unveiled a project—a massive coal plant—that she believes spells disaster for the county and its heritage. After trying and failing to organize resistance to the plant from within the government, Omar decided to become a full-time activist. “I’m not a tree hugger,” she says, “but I don’t want the blood of Lamu on my hands.”

Lamu is home to one of the world’s largest populations of buffalo in a country known for its national parks and game reserves, as well as rich marine life and beaches. Its attractions also include Lamu town, located on the island of the same name. Founded in the 14th century, the town is the oldest continuously inhabited Swahili settlement on the East African coast. A UNESCO World Heritage site, the town was, until a spate of terrorist attacks on the mainland, one of Kenya’s main tourist destinations.

The 8.8 million megawatt-hours coal plant would be built on the island’s doorstep. It is one piece of an ambitious economic development plan for the coastal region known as the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor. The project is intended to facilitate the transport of goods and services from landlocked Ethiopia and South Sudan to the Kenyan coast without passing through the crowded Mombasa port, which already serves Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. As planned, the LAPSSET scheme includes a deep-sea port, a pipeline, a series of resort towns, and other investments in the region.

At its launch, then-President Mwai Kibaki promised “that this day will go down in history as one of the defining moments—when we made a major stride to connect our people to the many

socio-economic opportunities that lie ahead.” He argued that the plant would allow Kenya to generate more revenue from the transport of goods and services to its landlocked neighbors, and open parts of the country’s north to investment. But the estimated \$16-billion project is already more than a year behind schedule, and it has stirred an outcry from county residents who fear displacement, pollution, and irreversible damage to their way of life.

The battle over the coal plant is emblematic of tensions triggered by Kenya’s foreign-policy pivot to the East. Under President Daniel Arap Moi (1978–2002), Western governments held significant influence over the country’s external affairs. But that changed with President Kibaki (2002–2013), who began to give China greater sway. Kibaki, an economist, unveiled the LAPSSET project as part of his development plan, Vision 2030. Despite its modern graphics and design, Vision 2030 is essentially a revival of the central-planning approach to economic policy popular in much of Africa and Asia during the 1970s. China, which is today Africa’s main trade and investment partner, still uses central planning, so its reappearance is a predictable part of Kenya’s ideological swivel. President Uhuru Kenyatta, reelected to a second term this August, has further expanded this approach.

The strategy, which privileges economic development over environmental protection, undercuts Kenya’s global leadership in renewable energy. Today, up to 70 percent of the nation’s power comes from renewable sources, such as a massive geothermal power plant in the Rift Valley. But the company building this new plant in Lamu insists it will bring down Kenya’s high cost of energy. With the construction of the coal plant, the largest private sector-led infrastructure project in East and Central Africa, Kenya joins seven other countries on the continent

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looking to coal to address increasing energy demands. According to CoalSwarm, an industry watchdog, there were 171 operational or proposed coal plants in Africa as of December 2015. The majority of the new plants will be constructed by Chinese companies, which are partially owned by the Chinese government. For Beijing, these plants are an opportunity to exert soft power by facilitating economic development. African elites may also benefit, but the case of Lamu suggests that, in the arrangement, ordinary Africans may be getting a raw deal.

### COAL'S CLIMATE COSTS

In September 2014, Kenya's government awarded a consortium of three organizations—Gulf Energy, an independent Kenyan company affiliated with the Oman-based conglomerate of the same name; Centum Investments, a Kenyan investment firm; and Sichuan Electric Power Design and Consulting Company, based in China—the rights to build the plant in the small mainland resort town of Manda Bay, a 10-minute boat ride from Lamu town. Since the consortium, dubbed Amu Power, made its plans public in 2015, the plant has drawn some of the most intense environmental organizing in Kenya's recent history.

Lamu residents say the coal plant is a pragmatically unfeasible, technologically unsound, and financially irrational death knell for a region already struggling with terrorism and the resulting economic downturn.

Building a coal plant in 2017 is far out of step with the global conversation on the future of energy. Even China, where the company contracted to construct the plant hails from, has stopped building new coal plants because of their environmental costs. In January 2017, China's National Energy Administration announced that it was decommissioning 103 coal-fired power plants as part of its efforts to reduce pollution. Despite claims by some mining companies that it is possible to produce

clean coal, there is overwhelming evidence that coal emissions at any level are dangerous to people and the natural environment. Smoke emitted by the plants contains significant amounts of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide, as well as particulate matter and trace metals like mercury. Greenpeace estimates that the particulate matter alone causes up to 800,000 deaths a year worldwide.

But this plant also poses challenges specific to Kenya: As with other political issues in the country, land is central to concerns surrounding the coal project. At the time of Kenya's independence in 1963, the vast majority of the area that is today Lamu County was populated by indigenous Bajuni, Somali, and Swahili, as well as Arab descendants of the Omani who conquered the East African coast in the 18th century. Most

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of these groups are small in number relative to the national population, and the arid Lamu hinterland therefore became a haven for wildlife, particularly elephants and buffalo.

Between 1977 and 1978, the Kenyan government launched the Kenyatta Settlement Scheme in the Mpeketoni Division of Lamu County. Hundreds of landless farmers from the country's central highlands were bused into what was seen as empty territory. But the fertile tracts in fact belonged to the indigenous communities through communal and historical land ownership structures. Under these informal arrangements, all members of the community have a right to work the land and

an obligation to protect it. Sale and transfer of ownership is impossible without agreement from everyone.

According to a 2012 paper by Paul Mwangi of the University of Nairobi, the settlers' arrival placed a massive strain on the environment. Natural vegetation cover in the area declined and the settlers' agricultural practices—continuous as opposed to cyclical cropping—added to the environmental stress. Household water demand increased dramatically, depleting boreholes on which locals depend for freshwater, and as some of the settlers began growing crops along riverbanks, the water quality further downstream also declined.

Most importantly, as part of a ploy to gain political support in the region, the government made a point of issuing the new arrivals with title deeds for their land. This ruptured the traditional ownership systems and created wealth disparities with the indigenous community, who were not granted land titles. These inequities remain a point of tension, particularly as the county population grows and indigenous youth find themselves unable to inherit and monetize family land.

Manda Bay, the site of the proposed coal plant, is one area where indigenous communities maintain strong ownership rights, but the construction of the power plant threatens to disrupt that. "It has triggered so much land speculation in the Manda Bay area," Omar tells me, "shifting the value of land so much in such a small time." Part of the LAPSSET plan is to improve utilities in the area surrounding the coal plant, and speculators are buying land in hopes of selling it at a profit once the services are in place. "I have 10 acres and now with the values so high I can just sell one quarter and easily make money, but the locals, they can't sell because they don't have titles," one landowner told the nonprofit Saferworld last year.

The project also threatens the livelihoods of residents in the Manda Bay area and further

afield. Tourism is the region's biggest source of revenue, as Lamu is home to some of the most exclusive boutique hotels on the continent, including the lavish Manda Bay resort. The tourism economy has ripple effects beyond the lodging, too. Many hotels justify their prices by providing organic, locally grown meals, relying on the mainland for produce and fishermen for a daily catch. In fact, for fishermen, who are already facing the loss of marine life due to dredging done for the LAPSSET port, the coal stack would likely be the end of their livelihoods. The fishermen's traditional dhows—large, hand-crafted boats typical of the East African coast—are themselves tourist attractions, and sunset cruises are among the most sought-after activities for visitors. The coal plant, a tower spewing clouds of smoke and ash, threatens all this. "Look at Manda Bay Resort," Omar says with a laugh. "They want to put a giant coal stack at the entrance of a hotel that charges \$226 per night!"

The technology envisioned for the plant has also sparked criticism. Its developers are proposing what's known as a "once-through system," by which ocean water is used to cool the plant's engines and then returned to its source. Most countries that still use coal have abandoned these systems. By raising the temperature of water bodies, they harm marine life, and they also require large volumes of water to run. In the U.S., only coal plants built before 1970 use the technology.

## NO DAY IN COURT

Save Lamu, a coalition of local activists, has made this critique of the plant's technology a basis of its efforts to lobby Kenya's National Environmental Management Agency (NEMA). Founded in 2010, the group has petitioned the National Environmental Tribunal (NET), a court that hears appeals arising from licenses issued by NEMA, to revoke Amu Power's permit. In their case against NEMA and Amu

Power, activists argued that the agency had issued the license illegally by, among other missteps, violating rules on public consultation, ignoring the plant's environmental impact, and failing to mitigate possible negative health and ecological consequences. Save Lamu activists have also been enjoined as plaintiffs in a case brought by Okiya Omtata, a prominent Kenyan lawyer, challenging the permit's legality.

Organizers with Save Lamu say that NEMA never read or responded to comments they filed as part of the plant's legally mandated approval process and that the agency granted the license to Amu Power just a week after the end of the comment period, without acknowledging the feedback they submitted. In their NET appeal the group also says that Amu violated a 2013 regulation by not holding any public consultations on the project since submitting its environmental impact assessment to the government. Meanwhile, the 1,000-page assessment, published in English, was never summarized, translated, or distributed to anyone outside the company and NEMA. "This is the most important document for this project," Omar says, "and most of us haven't seen it."

Activists also say that both the tribunal and NEMA have repeatedly frustrated their efforts to get a fair hearing. Save Lamu has twice worked with international environmental groups to fly in experts from coal-producing countries to testify before the NET, and each time the court has adjourned without holding hearings. (The NET has blamed the cancelations on a lack of money to keep the tribunal running and has petitioned Kenya's chief justice for additional funds. NEMA and Amu Power did not respond to repeated requests for comment for this story.) "I can't tell if it's just inefficiency or if they're doing it on purpose, but it's disheartening," says Omar Mohamed Elmawi, the national liaison officer at Save Lamu. Other government agencies also appear to favor Amu over the activists. A separate

hearing on the coal plant, held by the Energy Regulatory Commission, a government agency that licenses energy-related infrastructure projects, was hurriedly relocated the evening before, to a less accessible site. Save Lamu activists made the hearing, but just barely.

In November 2016, the NET granted Save Lamu an automatic stay that prohibits Amu from continuing construction until the appeal is resolved. But the final outcome is far from clear.

Brazen disregard for procedure is not unusual in Kenya, but given the importance of Lamu's tourism economy to the country and in light of the highly contentious presidential

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election this past August, activists expected a stronger response. Organizers had hoped to put environmental issues on the political agenda, and, during the only presidential debate, an audience member asked about the coal plant's impact. But Kenyatta wasn't present and his main challenger, Raila Odinga, appeared to suggest that he believed coal was necessary for Kenya's economic development. This frustrated the project's opponents, some of whom worked on his campaign.

Critics of the project are also disappointed by the county government's conduct. Omar notes that, per the Kenyan constitution, the ability to designate land for the plant's construction

lies in the hands of the local authority, Lamu County. But it was the national Ministry of Lands that approved the transfer of property. “They only called us in after they had given Amu the contract to build the plant,” she says of her time in the county government (CEC).

According to Save Lamu, the CEC has not taken a unified position on the project. All 20 of the elected members of the County Assembly approved the grant of land to the project, but the CEC, the administrative branch of the county government, has wavered. “They submitted comments to NEMA during one of the hearings expressing some reservations, but those comments were later withdrawn,” says Elmawi. Some members of the county administration, like Women’s Representative Shakila Abdallah, have joined Save Lamu in opposing the plant, but it is unclear what the position of the new CEC will be. (New members, who as of August have yet to be sworn in following the recent presidential election, were unavailable for comment for this story.)

## DEATH KNELL

While the coal plant’s proponents argue it will help meet Kenya’s growing energy requirements, others doubt its supposed economic advantages. Several experts who have assessed plans for the plant say that Kenya has no need for all the energy it will generate, and given that neighboring countries like Ethiopia and Uganda already sell their surplus to Kenya, there is no regional market for energy exports. According to Natural Justice, an international environmental law nonprofit that is supporting Save Lamu in its campaign against Amu, the power produced by the plant will almost certainly be far in excess of what Kenya can absorb. “The project plan only makes sense if you assume that Kenya’s energy demand will grow by 15 percent by 2035, but even the Ministry of Energy’s own projections for that period put growth potential at only 8.5

percent,” says Rose Birgen, a program officer at Natural Justice.

According to NEMA, the plant will use coal imported from South Africa, Mozambique, Indonesia, and Australia until local sources become available. Amu Power says the importation plan is temporary, and that in a few years the plant will rely on coal deposits discovered in 2010 in the central Kenyan town of Kitui. But experts argue that any putative savings from producing domestic energy cheaply will be canceled out by the expense of importing the coal. Erik Nordman, an assistant professor at Grand Valley State University, in Michigan, who studied plans for the plant, concluded that, because of the need to use South African coal, any energy produced by the plant would be generated at a loss. “The total cost of importing coal for this one facility,” he writes, “about \$180 million per year ... would exacerbate Kenya’s already significant trade deficit.” Nordman added that the timeline for the construction of a railway line to connect Lamu and Kitui is so uncertain that the plant would depend on coal from South Africa almost indefinitely.

Perhaps most alarming for locals is that they could be denied the one benefit that could flow directly from such a scheme—jobs. The firm contracted to build the plant plans to bring in 1,400 Chinese laborers to complete the project, and it’s expected to hire workers from other parts of Kenya to support them. In fact, the only direct compensation offered to Lamu residents is for land acquired by Amu for the construction of the plant, compensation that is fueling the land speculation Omar mentions.

Omar doesn’t consider herself an environmental absolutist, in that she says providing social and economic opportunities sometimes requires environmental concessions. “But,” she says, “this project just doesn’t make sense.”

The coal plant is just one of many problems Lamu has faced in recent years. Kenya’s ongoing conflict with the extremist group al-Shabab was

triggered by the 2011 kidnapping of a French tourist in the northern tip of Lamu County. Boni forest, a section of the county that borders Somalia, has been the site of several battles with the terror group, and in July nine men were beheaded during a siege on their town. Growing numbers of young men from Kenya are crossing the border to join al-Shabab, and some locals argue that grievances regarding the land issue contribute to the radicalization of young men from the region.

The reputational costs of the terrorism problem have been huge, even for the island, which is tens of kilometers away from the location of attacks and relatively safe. (With only 24,000 permanent residents, outsiders are easy to identify.) But the government has made things worse. In 2014 it imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew on island residents that paralyzed

the island's hotels and contributed to a wave of human-rights violations by security officials, including arbitrary detentions. That curfew was only lifted after activists sued the government. A similar three-month curfew went into place in July in the Boni forest area following the beheading incident and the shooting of a senior government official just prior to the contentious presidential election.

Omar says the government is not listening to any of the concerns voiced by local activists and officials, and that frustration is part of why she resigned her county government job. While Nairobi elites and international investors stand to make an enormous profit from the coal plant, for Lamu residents it would be a decisive blow to their homes and way of life. "It's a national project," she says, "but it is the people of Lamu who will suffer." ●