In Nairobi, BRT is Making Steady Progress

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Situated strategically as the gateway to East Africa, Kenya’s capital of Nairobi is one of the region’s largest cities, with a population of nearly 4.4 million people and an estimated 6 million in the metro area. Given the city’s growing density and booming population, vehicle traffic congestion and long commutes are a daily reality for many residents. Currently, most public transport service in Nairobi is provided by “matatus”, which are privately owned minivans and buses. Matatu routes typically start or end in the central business district (CBD), leading to inefficiencies and extra transfers for many commuters. An estimated 42% of passengers need to transfer at least once to complete their trips on an average commute in Nairobi.

The absence of government-led route planning has led to poor service coverage on some routes and an oversupply on high-demand routes. Vehicles often wait to fill before departing, leading to delays for passengers. On low-demand routes, service is irregular and the vehicles are often older and poorly maintained. In a bid to improve the efficiency of the transport system, the Nairobi Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (NaMATA) was launched in 2017 to oversee the establishment of a more integrated, efficient, sustainable, and reliable transport system. The agency has a mandate of implementing BRT on five corridors identified in the city’s 2014 Mass Rapid Transit Harmonisation Plan.

These corridors have high existing public transport ridership and have the potential to benefit the greatest number of residents. NaMATA is currently working on implementing BRT along four out of the five corridors. As these corridors are being developed, opportunities are also present for streamlining existing matatu services by introducing cross-town public transport networks that connect directly to popular destinations. Cross-town routes are expected to reduce the need for transfers, thereby eliminating some traffic in the CBD and benefitting approximately 156,000 daily passengers.

Collaboration with the matatu sector, whose workers depend on the service for their livelihoods, is also important. To that end, NaMATA initiated dialogue with the city’s public transport owners and representative organizations to address various aspects of the future business model, including operational and compensation-related considerations. Next steps include...
A successful BRT system will line up with existing and future passenger demand patterns while providing a core piece of infrastructure that is safe, affordable, and appealing to all types of commuters.

A progress update for BRT implementation across the five corridors is detailed as follows:

- **BRT line 1** runs on Mombasa Road and Waiyaki Way parallel to the Nairobi Expressway, from Uthiru through Kangemi, CBD, Imara Daima, and Athi River to Kitengela. The Kenya National Highways Authority has plans to implement BRT infrastructure alongside the expressway. KeNHA shared preliminary designs with stakeholders, but a concrete timeline is yet to be determined.

- **BRT line 2**, identified as the pilot BRT corridor, runs along Thika Superhighway from Ruiru to Ngara, with a planned service extension through the CBD to Kenyatta National Hospital. The project, currently under implementation by NaMATA, includes: construction of dedicated BRT lanes; 13 BRT stations, including the conversion of existing footbridges along the highway; terminals at the central railway station and several landmarks; and depots at Ruiru and Kasarani. Demand along the corridor is substantial, reaching 27,000 passengers per direction during peak hours.
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To handle this volume, the designs should include passing lanes and high-capacity stations with dedicated infrastructure in the CBD.

- **BRT line 3** runs along Juja Road from Dandora to Kenyatta National Hospital via Haile Selassie Avenue in the CBD. A global engineering firm recently reviewed the designs, construction costs, and the environmental and social impact assessments of the corridor, with support from the European Union and the French Development Agency. Implementation of the corridor is expected to be funded by European partners.

- **BRT line 4** runs from Mama Lucy Hospital in Donholm through Jogoo Road and the CBD to T Mall, Bomas, and Karen.

- **BRT line 5** runs from Ridgeways via Balozi (Allsops) to Imara Daima along Outer Ring Road. The section between Allsops and Imara Daima will be implemented under a KES 6.4 billion financing agreement with South Korea. Aside from the median BRT lanes, the corridor will require retrofits to accommodate stations, bus turning, and pedestrian access.

When fully implemented, the BRT corridors, combined with more convenient bus routes, will be critical tools for encouraging more residents to choose public transport over private vehicles. Well-managed and quality public transport networks are essential to moving masses across a major city like Nairobi and can ultimately lead to increased efficiency, less pollution, and a reduction in transport costs for everyone. Nairobi has the potential to be an urban model for the region and the world if it continues to focus on modernizing transport infrastructure, mitigating traffic congestion, and increasing accessibility with connected rapid transit systems.