

Addressing regional imbalances and integration at the coast.
Opportunities in the new constitution.

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The coastal region of Kenya is highly significant when it comes to the history of Kenya as a nation. This is especially because the coast plays host to many resources both natural and manmade. These have since the colonial times elicited a lot of interest from government, citizens, tourists as well as investors keen to enjoy a piece of the rich heritage that abides in the area.

In the process of the ensuing interactions, the coast has gone through good and bad experiences. The biggest is playing host to immigrants from Kenya and the world; both permanent and temporary, investors as well as tourists. This is especially because the coast also serves as a gateway to the rest of the world through the Mombasa port which also serves Kenya's immediate neighbours who are land locked.

The coastal region of Kenya has thus got a rich history of trade, tourism and religion. Like many other parts of Kenya, there are many different ethnicities as well as faiths. The presence of immigrants from the rest of Kenya, tourists and traders make the coastal population very diverse. This has over time come along with a host of challenges of coexistence.

Due to the immense and diverse interests at play in this region, a lot of important issues affecting the people here have been left un addressed over many years to the extent of being referred to as historical injustices by the residents. Some of these experiences are also occurring elsewhere while some are unique to the coast.

Examples are the ownership and distribution of land, exploitation of natural resources, unemployment, runaway poverty, illiteracy and drug abuse to mention but a few. The problems and challenges affecting coastal residents are seen as existing regional imbalances depending on their intensity or how the residents see the same issues being addressed elsewhere. This has brought about a feeling of neglect on the region especially by the government despite it being one of the prime parts of the country.

On perceived or otherwise existing imbalances, the land question stands out as the most prominent and widespread problem at the coast. The main problem is access and ownership as often highlighted in various fora and the media. There are reported many squatters at the coast while many people sit on land whose ownership they don't have.

The fear of eviction for one reason or another is a living nightmare and makes life very uncertain. Indeed, the land issue at the coast is very emotive and has often led to violent confrontations between residents sometime with tribal intones. Examples are when the natives attempt to evict immigrants from the main land like seen in the past clashes in Likoni and other areas.

Politicians have not failed to exploit this issue for political mileage thus ensuring it is prolonged and perhaps never solved. This compounds the issue making it hard to understand by those in government responsible for addressing those problems. Sometime the lack of unity among residents has led to weakened efforts in the lobbying process towards the beginning of a solution.

In some areas, there is misrepresentation of facts which makes genuine cases lack enough credibility. In a country with competing interests, all targeting the same government and the land problems also existing elsewhere in the country, a solution for the coastal land question remains elusive.

Perhaps the residents can use provisions of the new constitution and the renewed spirit towards its implementation to find a solution to this nagging problem. It is an opportunity they cannot afford to let go or even delay seizing.

Drugs and substance abuse has become a living nightmare at the coast. Drugs have killed many young people and destroyed the livelihood of many others, broken families and ruined institutions of learning. It is now a regional problem threatening to get out of hand. This is mainly because of what residents say is lack of commitment from the government in dealing with the menace. The government in turn has blamed the residents for cohabiting with the drug dealers and abetting the vice a claim the residents are quick to counter saying the drug cartels are complex and dangerous and any attempt to unravel them is met by death punishment by the drug lords and their agents. The latter could hold some truth given frequent media reports on the murderous world of the drug trade.

Further complicating the matter is the possibility of government officials participating in the trade and taking advantage of their positions to protect themselves.

The drug issue at the coast has now become a regional shame and residents need to seek an understanding of why it is so prevalent here and forthwith seek solutions to the problem. These solutions may be found elsewhere but the new constitutional dispensation gives citizens a probable framework to begin confronting this and other evils in the region. Unemployment, poor education standards and resource exploitation challenges have not eluded the region. Although these are issues being experienced all over the country, there is a feeling among the coastal residents that their area bears the worst effects. This is especially in the education sector which according to residents has been neglected by the government or given lesser attention than in other parts of Kenya. This is blamed for the low standards of education at the coast.

These and many others are evidence of probable imbalances in development of the coast region compared to other parts of the country. The communities residing at the coast therefore need to explore opportunities through provisions of the new law to address some or all of these problems.

Integration

The coast region of Kenya is home to many ethnic communities classified into tribes and sub tribes. Cultural practices, economic activities, languages and even religion are as diverse as the communities. Indeed, the coastal region has the highest concentration of Muslims compared to the rest of Kenya which is predominantly Christian. Other faiths exist in relatively smaller densities. The region also passes as probably the only one with inhabitants of different racial backgrounds with a substantial population of Arabs. Most of these came to the coast because of trade during the pre-colonial period.

Diversity in ethnicity is further enriched by immigrants from the mainland who flock the coast in search of economic opportunities ending up settling at the coast. With them they bring competition for common resources as well as some of their cultural practices and social behavior which at time upset the native residents. There are also the ever present tourists who besides bringing in foreign income also come with their different lifestyles.

On the religious front, diversity exists within and among the religions present. Although some of these differences are not pronounced, they are real.

This sort of diversity and mixture of cultures calls for ethnic tolerance in order to promote coexistence. It is a delicate balance to strike especially in light of the fact that all of these communities and groups are pursuing different interests.

The residents of the coast deserve kudos for their spirited efforts to coexist with people who come from elsewhere to settle in their midst. But this has not come without its challenges and hiccups. At times, violent confrontations especially between natives and immigrants have happened exemplified by the infamous Likoni clashes of 1997.

There have been efforts especially by the church and also the government to preach peace and harmonious coexistence with a measure of success. However, even when these successes have been achieved, there is evident segregation. While it may be easy to blame the native residents for it and perhaps label them anti social, the so called visitors or immigrants often import their social structures and end up staying in clusters similar to where they came from. Some of these clusters have ended up forming into villages identified using upcountry names e.g. Kisumu ndogo, Makindu and others. Religious and social separation follows ensuring minimum interactions between locals and the visitors. This often breeds tension and eventually hatred and violence.

In the absence of any confrontations, it is sometimes mistakenly concluded that people have integrated but this is far from true. They are merely living side by side with no understanding between them. There is a need for people to understand that true integration involves not only physical coexistence but the sharing of values and attributes that dignify human life. It involves appreciating each others ethnicity, race, culture, language and work. It also involves appreciating positive gestures extended to us by others and where possible reciprocating. Overall, true integration is celebrating life together guided by respect for the rights of others. This way, people will not fight but rather confront their life challenges with superior will powered by their strength in diversity.

The IEF process seeks to bring people together to dialogue and develop a common approach to issues that is beneficial to all. It involves serious self assessment and audit on personal character and capacity to accommodate other people and their views before engaging them. This adds value to interpersonal and intercommunity interactions and ensures value added engagements. This is the building block of integration.

With regard to the situation at the coast, the new constitution presents numerous opportunities for alleviating the perennial problems that have been bothering the residents just like it does for other parts of the country. The most important thing to do is therefore to identify which parts of the new law or new institutions and frameworks provide the best platform to tackle the different issues.

- The chapter on devolution provides a chance for people to determine the destiny of their counties as far as development is concerned to a good extent.
- The Bill of rights provides many answers to long standing issues of denial and abuse of people's freedoms and rights.
- Te provisions on land management is probably the most relevant section of the new laws because the land question has been present for the longest at the coast.
- Other laws like appertains to citizenship and leadership and integrity also provide serious avenues to address issue affecting wananchi.

These are just a few examples. The ball squarely lies in the peoples' court to ensure that these laws are implemented and they help them to mitigate or solve their nagging problems.