Smart Cities: Implications of Konza City

Last year we saw the former Permanent Secretary for Information and Communications Technology Dr. Bitange Ndemo defend the Konza City project against demeaning comments such as the ones raised by Dr. David Ndii on it being a pipe dream that was not conceptualized but rather dropped from the sky. A recall of such debates made me want to know more about the implications of such a project to Kenyans.

As a physical planner, it is necessary to understand that Konza was implemented as a Vision 2030 flagship project to position Kenya as a leading ICT destination that would leverage and expand Kenya's technology focused industries. Konza Techno City would be a sustainable, world-class technology hub and a major economic driver for the nation, with a vibrant mix of businesses, workers, residents, and urban amenities. It was even likened to Manhattan, Venice, London Zone 1, Paris and Beijing Inner City that are pioneer smart techno cities of our time.

But is such an idea pragmatic, inclusive and sustainable especially in Kenya? Is it possible to have a city where big ideas become real, where traffic jams are obsolete, where women and men develop futuristic technologies together, where natural and urban ecosystems coexist, where the rich and poor are lifted together?

A smart city like Konza would definitely facilitate industry in Kenya. Considering the fact that a majority of Kenya's educated youth is unemployed, and the greater private and public sectors are stuck in archaic production systems with little to no research. Konza would play a major role in facilitating industry and advanced research in manufacturing. It would be similar to the New Delhi-Mumbai industrial corridor — a State-Sponsored Industrial Development Project of the Government of India. The smart city would incubate start-ups, pass the necessary skills to recruits and speed up their development into fully fledged companies that could provide skills and absorb many of Kenya's graduates.

Konza would also host high end technical training institutions that would target the development of pre-employment skills to prepare future workers, in-service training to upgrade the employed work force and enhance active labor market training programs to reintegrate the unemployed and disadvantaged. With a motivated youth that is computer literate, Konza could be a window to change.

The Konza City could also take advantage of existing and upcoming infrastructure. The expansion of the Mombasa highway into a dual carriage way and the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR)-that has also faced hurdles on its implementation would directly benefit Konza. Such a city would need more energy to run thus the proposal to have 5000Mw extra power production. A liberalized energy sector would be more meaningful that would directly bring down the cost of energy.

In my opinion, Konza city is a great idea, where people can come, learn and work; where technology is used efficiently to address all sectors – water, energy, housing, environment, health, transportation, education. It could be a great example for not only Kenya but for Africa. If well implemented it could become an incubatory hub where so many people who say they want to develop their products in Africa, can get a starting point - where they can have a lab and make the product efficient for the African market. There would be facilities and resources in place to take it to the next level.

As much as the concept is exciting it also needs to be executed with the highest standards of smart city building. That means taking into account it's sustainability from the beginning. Problems of urbanization need to be addressed early on. Konza can model some of the new ideas – such as designing to encourage walking, cycling, trams & electric cars. Housing is a huge opportunity – for the design and building of eco- houses.

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