

Implications of the creation of new cities in Uganda

By Dr. Fred Muhumuza*

On April 28, 2020, the Parliament of Uganda approved the creation of 15 cities, seven of which were to start operations on 1st July 2020¹. The number of cities starting in the current financial year was later increased to ten to avoid a political leadership gap as the next scheduled date of starting the extra three cities was beyond the general election date of February 2021. Herein lies the true challenge of the urbanization drive in Uganda that is more inclined to politics and associated legislation rather than other natural factors that determine graduation of urban areas from small townships to cities.

The rules of natural progression of urban centres, based on historical experiences, indicate that urbanization occurs mainly because rural to urban migrations that result in growth in the size of the urban population and the associated demand for services. There is, therefore, a linkage between the need to creation of cities and service delivery as is so often quoted in Uganda, but that may be as far as it goes. There must be a clear logical reason to show that the previous level of government, in this case, a Municipality, by its structure and status, had failed and could not deliver the required quantity and quality of services. Otherwise, we run a danger of simply changing a tag on the “Welcome to ...” signpost in the outskirts of the urban area.

The rapid urbanization in Uganda, estimated at 20%,

could be more of a legal trend involving deliberate gazetting of Town Boards, Town Councils, Municipal Councils and Cities, rather than a true and natural launch-pad for urbanization. A revision of the policy and practice will certainly be necessary to avoid creating rural ‘enclaves’ inside cities by simply gazetting adjacent areas to increase the geographical coverage of a city. For example, by a mere resolution of Parliament, hundreds of rural homes without even a pit latrine were crafted into cities, not to forget that some of these had already been in Municipalities for a decade or so.

Growth of cities, must not lose sight of the original causes of its evolution as a small urban centre as some of these will be tapped for its continued advancement. For example, some cities grew up around intersections of ancient trade routes while others thrived from key production or processing of major natural resources like oil, power generation, ports, and education centres. As these urban centres created surplus resources due to increased production and productivity, as well as new demands for goods and services there was a need for different forms of organizing administrative units². The surplus resources demanded a higher level of organization and were able to sustain the city by triggering further growth.

To address Uganda’s urbanization drive, one has to ask several questions including the following: What was the need that the city came to answer? What is the process of creating a city and does it adequately consider all aspects such as political,

* Dr. Fred Muhumuza has experience of over twenty years in development policy research, analysis, policy formulation and review, with a parallel teaching career at Makerere, Nkumba, and African Bible Universities. He has undertaken assignments in public policy, institutional development, strategic planning, and capacity building. He has served as an Economic Advisor to Government of Uganda, a Research Fellow at the Economic Policy Research Centre, a Senior Manager at KPMG Uganda and Research Specialist with the Financial Sector Deepening Uganda. Muhumuza has provided political economy advice to a number of development programmes funded by development partners as well as to the private sector.

social, economic, cultural, etc.? What is the level of preparedness for these cities? What is the current resources gap and how can it be closed during both the short and long-term to realize the anticipated growth trajectory?

While the policy provides for consideration of the above and other questions, the practice seems to be more inclined to meet the legal and procedural requirements for starting a city as a means of meeting the political objectives. For example, the argument that the newly created cities will start by using the same budget as the Municipalities indicates a false start given the bigger administrative requirements of the city.

Going forward, the government should urgently consider updating the current information on resources requirements for growth of each city using rigorous technical processes that are independent of the politics of the day³. The analysis should go beyond mere anchorage of growth to one current potential such as tourism, oil, location, etc. that can easily be swayed by sentiments. The increase in population and changes in the demographic characteristics, should and are bound to trigger other changes in land use, economic activity, culture, leading to significant economic and social transformations. The city should have higher levels of literacy and education, lower fertility levels, better health and life expectancy, greater access to social services and enhanced opportunities for cultural and political participation.

The linkage between lives and livelihoods needs stronger planning and execution of strategic initiatives to blend the public and private sector demands for purposes of boosting inclusive local economic development. A city that does not offer opportunities for socio-economic development of the ever-growing population is bound to stagnate or even retard. Gone are the days when the foundations of the growth of a city were based on slavery forced labour or taxation by the ruling or conquering class of people.

The current and future managers of cities should look beyond too much focus on current challenges such as traffic jams, slum dwellings, street vendors, crime rates and limited revenues. In addition, they should focus on strategic aspects by considering what the city will look like in decades to come and future drivers of growth opportunities for individual persons and the entire city⁴. Changing technology, and political or trade affiliations are known to have changed the importance of cities leading to the destruction of several that did not adopt new means of survival and growth. Strategic choices include the establishment of knowledge and innovation hubs for championing learning and inventions; and promoting primary production and productivity in

the neighbouring districts to create a strong base for industrial processing.

The leadership must go beyond local considerations and employ the best staff the world can offer, to ensure a framework for proper administration, good governance, accountability and transparency in the management of the city affairs. This will act as a foundation for future growth by offering confidence to the central government, development partners, civil society and the private sector. Cities do not simply grow out of individual initiatives by the government but also through the perceived and actual interpretation of the signals from these initiatives by other stakeholders. Specifically, the private sector is a major driver of local economic development that creates opportunities for people who are the core reason for the creation and existence of the city.

The people and their demands for social services such as education and health, security, housing, water, transport and telecommunications, and livelihoods opportunities should be the reason for creation and management of the city. The city administrators must never be seen, regardless of the causes, considering the urban populations as a burden that needs to be resolved through any form of harassment. Instead, joint approaches for mitigation and resolution of adverse effects associated with such a population should be adopted at all times. After all, cities are mostly categorised, not by the number of paved kilometers of roads, square feet of office and business space, hospitals, but rather by the number of people – population size. Thus, Tokyo, Kinshasha and Cairo, will be known by their populations of 37.4 million, 9.5 million, and 9.5 million⁵. The rest of the other parameters such as number of airports, busses, street lights, hospitals, etc. are simply put in place to serve the base population.

Furthermore, the strategy for starting cities must always blend with the broader context of the national development framework. The cities must not grow in isolation but be part of the bigger regional and national development agenda. They should not only attract more populations from the surrounding areas but create an environment that keeps these populations in productive engagement within the neighbouring districts, Town councils and Municipalities. For example, cities must act as training centres that equip the youth for rural-based activities; markets for agricultural products; treatment centres for referral cases; and management hubs for interventions that support banking, insurance, judicial services, security coordination, and trade negotiations.

Finally, regardless of the major underlying cause of the new cities in Uganda, the focus should now shift

to fulfilling the wide array of anticipated goals and objectives. The government must take leadership in rallying all the stakeholders within and outside the city boundaries, to a common cause of growing a city that meets most of the expectations of current and future generations. All forms of resources – natural, human, financial, technological, etc. – should be adequately planned for and provided in their

right quantities to build a strong foundation and thereafter a trajectory into the middle and high-income status. Uganda should not only be known for its large number of cities, compared to its peers, but rather for the quality of life in these cities.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.parliament.go.ug/news/4614/parliament-approves-creation-15-cities>
- 2 <https://www.nber.org/papers/w19745>
- 3 Local Government Finance Commission (2012). Review of Local Government Financing: Financing Management and Accountability for Decentralized Service Delivery.
- 4 World Bank 2016. Uganda - Repositioning Local Governments for Economic Growth. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- 5 <https://www.google.com/>

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