Development Projects and (Re) Election of County Government Leaders in Kenya

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For the first time in Kenya's political history, development projects will play a critical role in the re-election bids of the incumbent governors and members of the county assemblies (MCAs) in 2017, and in subsequent county elections. In no other epoch in the history of Kenya have development projects taken center stage in the politics of this country. Following the promulgation of the new constitution and the establishment of county governments, expectations of Kenyans have been raised, with millions seeing development projects delivered by county government as their only saviour from the stinking trenches of historically skewed development, and the rot in public service. Consequently, Kenyans everywhere more than ever before, expect their county governments to design and implement high impact development projects that have the capacity to make a real difference in their lives, since development projects have become the principal means through which public services are being delivered in the counties. As a result, county governments must design and implement projects that not only make a difference in the lives of their county residents, but must execute development projects and interventions that deliver public value.

Whereas in the '80s and '90s development projects were perceived as favours from political godfathers, the spirit of devolution has so excitingly infected the nation to the extent that Kenyans now see development projects as a right. The dark days of developmental tokenism and political favours are fading away pretty fast, and county leaders who still operate under the historical hangovers of development tokenism and favours are writing their political epitaphs. Kenyans irrespective of their levels of education, have become increasing aware that development projects are not favours brought to them by some benevolent county leaders, but are their constitutional rights.

The decentralization of development financing to county governments has also changed the traditional discourse around development projects as ' things' brought by benevolent leaders to the people, but as cardinal responsibility of any sane county government. Interestingly, citizens in the forty seven counties are getting more critically aware of how much their devolved governments spend on recurrent and on development. While the majority of Kenyans are sympathetic to the growing wage bill, they have become more concerned about the allocations given to development projects. Development projects have thus come to occupy a critical place in the psyche of county residents all over the country. I suppose this is one of the reasons why the Office of the Controller of Budget (OCOB) provides quarterly reports on how county governments spend on both recurrent and development expenditures, with the hope that citizens will use these reports to hold their county governments accountable.

The salience and prominence of development projects in the political psyche of county governments is visible in the forums organized by county governments. For instance, at each devolution conference, counties compete in showcasing their development projects through the use of high technology including the use of digital maps, videos, and other 'digital' means to inform and educate the public about the development projects they have implemented. The political marketing of development in these forums are replicated at the county levels. A number of county governments have deployed the use of high technology in strategic locations within the counties, to showcase their development projects. At community events, including funerals, county leaders extol the projects that they have 'brought' to their county citizens. The politicization of development projects has taken a new dimension in Kenya's political economy, especially in Kenya's forty seven counties.

While the incumbent county leaders are busy traversing their counties to tell their county citizens about the projects they have implemented, their political opponents are equally busy traversing their counties to rubbish the development projects that have been implemented by the incumbents; referring to these 'development' projects as conduits for stealing public money, or as interventions that are skewedly designed to favour certain regions in the counties, especially the vote rich sub-counties and wards.

Thus, development projects are at the center of political discourse in all the forty seven counties. In a number of cases, political opponents will use the development projects implemented by the incumbents to demonstrate three things: how the so called development projects prioritized by the incumbents have not delivered public value to the county citizens; how the development projects have been deliberately designed to be cash cows for the powers that be; and lastly, how they (opponents) will design better and high impact development if given a chance to lead. Whichever way one looks at it, development projects are at the center stage of the political contests, campaigns and elections of not just the governors, but also members of the county assemblies (MCAs).

The power of development projects in the determination of elections at the county levels has been so pervasive that there have been constant tussles between the MCAs, and the County Executives, over the control of development projects at the ward level. While MCAs are by law required to represent, legislate and provide oversight, they have been conscious of the 'trap' that the executive has laid in wait for them: their re-election in their respective wards will not be pegged on the number of bills they have passed at the county assembly, nor on the number of committee meetings they attended in the provision of oversight, but by the number of 'development projects' they have influenced or 'initiated' in their respective wards. The MCAs know that the control of development projects is what will make a difference in their re-elections in 2017, and in the coming elections.

That is why MCAs are not 'contented' with the three roles specified in the constitution. They know that their influence and effectiveness in their wards is 'measured' by the number, and type of development projects that they have 'brought', in their wards. Kenyans can therefore forgive MCAs when at times they get physical with the county executives on the allocations given to their wards, through the enacted ward development legislations; they know that development projects will be at the center stage of their re-elections in election debate in 2017. The MCAs who have not initiated any development project in their wards are doomed like the Biblical Lot's wife. Both elected county leaders and ordinary citizens in all the 47 counties in Kenya are becoming more increasingly aware of the important role that development projects play in improving the services that they get from the county governments. The increased citizen expectations in the counties are largely informed by the type of development projects that they expect from their elected leaders and from the county governments.

Any elected county government leader who takes development projects for granted, and uses the projects as means for amassing personal wealth, or for spreading their benevolence, is doomed to fail in 2017, and in subsequent general elections. On the other hand, county leaders who design and implement high impact development projects that make a difference in the life of the county residents are poised for edifying and sustainable political assignments. In the coming years, the presidency of this country will be determined by the type of development initiated in the counties. In future, Kenyans will judge the best performing county leaders, not on the basis of political marketing, but on the basis of transformations in the counties brought by such leaders in their respective counties. And such county leaders will be called upon by Kenyans to take higher political appointments.

This will be for the listening and discerning leaders. However, the sad thing with political leaders, either at the county or national level, is that they mostly listen to what the captive groups around them say about their performance. The paradox, however, is that the 'captive group' around political leaders are mostly rent-seekers whose interests suffocate and frustrate the development projects and the delivery of public value. But the consolation Kenyans have from rent-seekers is that the spirit of devolution is radically changing the political economy of rent-seeking, as Kenyans demand more accountability and open governance of development projects.

The politicization and the high tech marketing of development projects across the forty seven counties, is a telling demonstration of the critical role that project design, planning and implementation will play in the re-election of governors and MCAs in next year's elections. What is interesting is that in some counties, the so called development projects will never have any demonstrable public value, and will not therefore lead to any positive change in the life of poor Kenyans who look to their devolved governments for change in the form of improved public services. Such projects are designed with the wallet in mind, rather than with the needs of the citizens in mind. They are deliberately designed to fail, to justify new wallet oriented projects. These are the type of projects referred to by project management specialists as 'headless chicken projects".

These projects behave like a chicken whose head has been chopped off: they give the impression of being alive when in truth they are long dead. The sad reality is that there are so many of these headless chicken projects in a number of counties. However, whether as headless chicken projects, or designed with the wallet in mind or with the needs of the citizens in mind, one thing is an inescapable truth: development projects will be at the center of the political campaigns in next year's gubernatorial and ward level elections.

About the Author

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Isaac Odhiambo Abuya has over 10 years' experience in designing, planning and implementing high impact development projects in Kenya. Before joining Kenya's county government of Homa Bay in 2013 as the county's Chief of Staff responsible for coordinating the executive office of the Governor and the county government's development policies, Isaac served as World Vision Kenya's Project Director, and was responsible for designing and implementation of a high impact social determinants of health project for vulnerable communities, families and children in Kenya.

Isaac also coordinated the first multi-county USAID/ PEPFAR HIV and AIDS prevention and care project that targeted over 1 million youth in Kenya and Tanzania with behavioral change and care interventions. He provided high level project leadership in the roll out of voluntary medical male circumcision interventions in non-circumcising communities in Kenya, and served as one of the principal consultants to USAID's effort in promoting voluntary medical male circumcision programming in the Royal Kingdom of Swaziland. He has provided technical support to a number of county governments and non-governmental organizations in Kenya on performance-based management and contracting and currently serves as the national chairman of the Performance Management Association of Kenya.

Isaac Abuya holds a Bachelor of Education degree from Egerton University, Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology from Kenyatta University, Master of Arts degree in Project Planning and Management from the University of Nairobi, and is waiting to graduate with a PhD in Project Planning and Management from the University of Nairobi, with a specialization in Project Design, Planning and Implementation. He is pursuing a second PhD in Public Administration and Public Policy at Kisii University.

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