

Lamu Transforms Transportation across Africa

A large scale project touted as a catalyst for sustainable economic growth in East Africa and Africa has been launched this month. The Lamu Port and South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) a.k.a. the Lamu corridor upon completion will be According to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, key segment of the great equatorial land bridge, which will connect the Eastern and Western Africa. It will also link Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa countries and position Kenya as a gateway to East Africa and the Great Lakes Region, he noted. Infrastructure is everything. Without it, sustainable development is unthinkable. Cognizant of this fact the three East African countries have launched this project. In particular, Ethiopia and Kenya enjoy cordial relations with much focus on politics and security. However, economic relations were next to none. Various economic indicators show that Kenya's export to Ethiopia in 2010 stood at 43 million dollars while import by Kenya from Ethiopia is 4.1 million dollars. Hence LAPSSET would address this anomaly, and the benefit of the project in unlocking trade and investment opportunities goes beyond the region.

Kenya's Prime Minister, Raila Odinga said that LAPSSET will be Africa's biggest infrastructure project and game changer in terms of pushing the economic development of the countries in the region.

Hub

The elaborate and colourful ground breaking ceremony of Lamu project took place in Magogoni, a sea side location that has for centuries enjoyed tranquillity but which would henceforth hum and buzz with construction work and after completion, unending hustle and bustle of port side economic activities. This site was chosen because it has a natural, wide channel capable of accommodating large ships. The bay is well sheltered and has a deep water of 18 meters along the main channel. In addition, it can be able to accommodate Panama-size vessels. The port will be three times the size of current Mombasa port as it accommodates huge vessels that cannot be accommodated by the latter. This project position Lamu as an important transshipment hub. Compared to Lamu, Mombasa's depth is 13 meters and accommodates only one ship at a time.

The port of Lamu is an ancient seaport. Its history dates back for at least a thousand years. Lamu town is also the largest in the Lamu Island which in turn is a part of the Lamu archipelago in Kenya. This old town was one of the original Swahili settlements along coastal East Africa. The town was first attested in writing by Arab travellers. Moreover, the town's history is marked by a Portuguese invasion in 1506 and the Omani domination around 1813. Its economy is based on trade and; currently, tourism takes the biggest share of its income as a tourist attraction site in the coastal region of Kenya. But the current project turns Lamu as the hub of the second transport corridor that passes through North Eastern part of Kenya. The Lamu corridor offers opportunity to strengthen the historic bonds of friendship and cooperation that have been the hallmark of strong regional ties. Prime Minister Meles said that the Lamu project will play an integral role in enhancing connectivity among the countries of the sub-region.

White Elephant?

The Lamu corridor project was initially conceived in 1975 but never took off until this month. The project is part and parcel Kenya's vision 2030. This grand vision is considered as a vehicle for accelerating the transformation of Kenya into a rapidly industrialized middle income nation. Today, the project has proved to be beneficial not only for Kenya but Ethiopia and other countries in the region as well. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and South Sudanese president, Salva Kiir, have both supported this vision and showed their commitment by unveiling a plaque to officiate the launch of the project. As the first project of its kind in Africa comprising seven major economic components; namely port, railway line, highway, crude oil pipeline, oil refinery and airport the project will play critical role in alleviating infrastructure hiccups in the region.

Its cost was estimated to be USD 16 billion in 2009. Recent estimates put the cost of the project at 23 billion dollars. The construction of the project is to be endorsed and get support from a number of organizations including the World Bank, Africa Development Bank and the African Union.

At the peak of the project, which will be between 2013 and 2018, it is expected that the Kenyan government will be spending somewhere around six percent of the country's Gross domestic product or 16 percent of its annual budget. The project is expected to contribute an additional three percent increase in Kenya's GDP by 2020. A feasibility study conducted last year indicated that it would also contribute between two percent and three percent to the annual gross domestic product of Ethiopia and South Sudan by making 160 million people of the region beneficiary. The project is to be implemented in phases over the next 18 years. At the end of the project a standard railway line of 1,710kms will run from Lamu to Ethiopia and Southern Sudan. The 980kms from Lamu to Moyale will be completed in four years. The standard gauge line will allow passenger train to travel at a speed of 160kms per hour and a cargo train to trek at a speed of 120kms per hour. In addition, the project also entails a crude oil pipeline of 1,260kms from Lamu to South Sudan and a product line to Ethiopia which will be about 980 km. In view of what Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said during the inauguration of the project, the cross border corridor facilitates the smooth transit of imports and exports in a timely and cost effective manner.

In a region characterized by discord and dissension, the laying of the foundation is truly historic. While many rejoiced at the start the project, there are others who labelled it as a flight of fancy. But there is no doubt that with the integrated effort of countries of the Horn of Africa and support of various organizations this vision will be realized. In the future, the LAPPSSSET project is expected to go beyond Juba to Central African Republic then to Cameroon's Port of Yaoundé and the coastal town of Doula. Who knows, the Lamu project may, in the future, connect the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean.

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