Title
On Marginal Areas and Peoples- The Kenyan Case Towards Definitional Clarity

Journal
Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 9(2)

ISSN
0041-5715

Author
Njuguna, G. Ngugi

Publication Date
1979

DOI
10.5070/F792017334

ON MARGINAL AREAS AND PEOPLES - THE KENYAN CASE TOWARDS DEFINITIONAL CLARITY

By

George Ngugi

In the past few months, there has been a niagara of policy statements by high officials in our government which clearly indicate that the main thrust of the next development decade will be towards the marginal areas and people. In a paper he wrote in 1977, our then Minister of Finance and Planning, Hon. Mwai Kibaki, had this to say: "In the new plan we will accord high priority to the development of marginal lands which comprise approximately two thirds of our territory."[1] It is important to consider the 'whys' of this about-turn by the policy makers and by so doing highlight some of the implications. The government argument is as clear as noon day:

> *Our high population growth of about 3.5 per cent per annum has raised to a high level the density of population in high and medium potential areas of the country. In the past decade, land pressure has been eased by settlement of our people on large farms in the scheduled areas of the country.*
>
> *This settlement programme is now coming to an end as all but a few farms in the areas in question have been resettled. It is inevitable, therefore, that we must focus our attention to the development of marginal lands.*[2]

Surely nobody can underplay the importance of the question of settling the landless in a country where agriculture is the lifeblood of the majority of our people. However, the implementation of this policy is not a chicken-feed affair. It is going to absorb a large sum of our meagre resources in terms of money and human energy. This then calls for a very close examination of the question of marginality.

What really are marginal lands and people? Here you find a whole spectrum of definitions. To the climatologist, these are areas where temperatures race across 100 F mark; to the conservative anthropologists, these are areas where you find the 'primitive' hunters and fruit gatherers; to the conservationists, this is where you find mother nature in its virgin state; to the tour operators, these are green pastures for their industry; to most economists, these are areas of idle capacity and to the politicians, these are areas and people of great embarrassment when we place them on the whole socio-economic screen of the country.

Now, which definition do we take? I choose to treat this question of marginality in the general framework of the laws that have been governing our social development for the last fifteen years. For those of us who spare a minute or two to read some of the country's development guidelines, you can recall that the question of where to invest or direct development was eloquently stated in the Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965; *African Socialism and Its Application to Planning in Kenya*, which to let the government speak for itself said:

> *One of our problems is to decide how much priority we should give in investing in less developed provinces. To make the economy as a whole grow as fast as possible, development money should be invested where it will yield the largest increase in net output. This approach will clearly favour the development of areas having abundant natural resources, good land and rainfall, transport and power facilities, and people receptive to and active in development. A million pounds invested in one area may raise net output by 20,000 while its use in another way may yield an increase of 100,000. This is a clear case in which investment in the second area is the wise decision because the country is 80,000 per annum better off by so doing and is therefore in a position to aid the first area by making grants or subsidized loans.*[3]

I do not want to participate in the mathematical game involved in this statement. Suffice it to say that, the government policy was hinged upon the economic law of efficiency (growth or profit) first and then redistribution afterwards. This applied to the whole national economy, both in the rural and urban areas. The consequences of this development strategy after 15 years are patently clear. Those places and people which and who promised the quickest returns swim in riches and luxury while the areas and people which and who failed to satisfy the calculus of profitable investment have remained stagnant or fallen deeper into the painful pits of misery. Hon. Mwai Kibaki frankly and boldly admits this:

> *Throughout the post independence period, we have striven to develop our economy with the principal objective of improving the living standards of all our people. Our endeavours*

> *have been partially fruitful. The economy has grown relatively fast and the average incomes of the people have thus improved. However, there is still in the greater section of our community manifestations of deprivation.*[4]

When Hon. Mwai Kibaki was talking about 'the greater section of our community', I choose to believe that he covered the nomadic pokots and the residents of Mathere Valley; the El Molo fishermen and the Nairobi beggars and parking boys; the Mwikalis who travels the whole day to fetch water and the Wanjikus who wake up at 3:00 a.m. to trek on foot from Limuru, Kariobangi or Kawangware to Nairobi to vend Sukuma-wiki; the Jolupo who are at the mercy of Kendu Bay waves trying to bait Kamongo and make a living out of it; and those people crowded in matatus to the last centimeter that they find it hard to expand their lungs. All in all, people and places who and which have remained peripheral during the past development period because the market mechanism voted them out as non-profitable places and people. These are the marginal areas and people.

It is therefore imperative to all who are concerned with this problem of marginality to address it as an issue of inequality both in the *horizontal* sense (i.e., inequality between areas) and also in the *vertical* sense (i.e., inequality between classes in each area). It is only through this kind of a holistic approach that we can come nearer to find the answer to this complex issue of inequality or marginality. The right answers will call for restructuring the institutions and values in our society that have given birth to this vice.

Simply to consider the question as one of landlessness is not enough because marginality exists in rural areas as well as in urban areas. It is not a rural affair only. The same goes with the population growth argument. Let us bear in mind that our population has been growing at a lower rate than our Gross National Product and yet unemployment and shanties have been on the increase. Therefore, our problem of marginality cannot be solved by just blooming the desert. The critical phase involves understanding the nature of the problem in its totality.

Footnotes

1. Kibaki, Mwai, "Planning Strategy for Sustained Growth", *The Weekly Review*, December 12, 1977, p. 27.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

3. Sessional Paper No. 10, 1965, *African Socialism and Its Application to Planning in Kenya*, Kenya.

4. Kibaki, ibid.

* * * * *