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Branding Kenya from the bottom up

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The rapid depreciation of the Kenya shilling compared to other international currencies is depressing. This scenario is attributable to seemingly terrible cultures as can now be illustrated.

Notably, there have been recent efforts to make Kenyans appreciate their country and themselves as a means of national branding. But, it seems that “Najivunia kuwa Mkenya (I am proud to be Kenyan)” slogan is not going places soon, even though seemingly well conceived. I do agree however that branding Kenya is the only way that the country, can sell itself and its products to the rest of the world. Perhaps, we can borrow a leaf from some not-too-distant perspectives.

When I was growing up in the rural areas, the most common means of transport to the local town was by Land Rovers, now commonly used as breakdowns in Nairobi. They were the only ones which could cruise through the earth roads, particularly during the rainy season. One striking thing that has been memorable ever since was a label on the Land Rovers, which read “buy Kenya build Kenya.” That time, I was young enough not to understand exactly what that meant, save for the fact that Land Rovers were supplied from a dealer based somewhere in Thika, under the brand name of Leyland. I am not sure whether the cars were made in Kenya, but I find that message to have been ideal then and even now.

Meanwhile, I also encountered and became part of this craze of Kenyans buying everything imported. It did not matter whether it was cars including fuel guzzlers, electronics, food, fruits, drinks, eggs and more. Importation became a culture. Anybody not hooked to it seemed backward. A sad scenario is illustrated by one person who in the 1980s visited London and while shopping, found an admirable suit, which he could not resist buying.

Upon coming home, the gentleman boasted to his friends how he had bought a nice woolen suit, during his trip. Further checking however, revealed that it was a Raymond suit manufactured in Eldoret, Kenya for export to Europe. The gentleman could neither believe nor forgive himself for a long while. Kenyans had gone that far in despising their own world-beating products. No wonder, many local manufacturing concerns have succumbed for lack of home support, particularly in the textile industry. But, I can now see a ray of hope. The trend can be reversed but only if, bottoms-up approaches, are applied to branding Kenya.

Perhaps we can benchmark from a recent function that I witnessed in Murang'a. It was a trade exhibition for business people in the town. The business community has formed itself into Muranga Industrial and Commercial Business Forum. The main objective of the association is to promote business in Muranga, through sensitizing people on the need to modernise business activities, and processes in Muranga town and its environs. Another objective is to promote innovation and nurture it for the best interests of the business sector in Muranga. The forum works very closely with Kenya National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Muranga Branch.

This was the second annual showcase held successfully in the town. I learnt that the last time Muranga had anything close to the last two trade fairs, was an agricultural show, way back in 1985. My role, as detailed by the business forum was to sensitise people about what is going on in the world and the national front regarding business leadership through entrepreneurship, the Youth Enterprise Fund and the need for business training. This was aimed at helping people to acquire renewed skills of doing business, more so given the dynamic changes occurring in the business sector.

In my view, Muranga Business sector is right on course. The business forum is likely to contribute substantially in developing small businesses into major entities, if the current approach is sustained. Essentially, small businesses are the multinationals of tomorrow. I therefore believe that "buy Muranga, build Muranga" is indeed a well conceived branding strategy. There is no need to invest in or travel to Thika or Nairobi for routine business and investment needs. Through the trade fair Muranga people now know where to get what, when and how. This example is an indicator of how branding Kenya can be replicated.

Indeed, national efforts should be preceded by branding Muranga, branding Nyeri, branding Kakamega, branding Kisumu, branding Machakos and so on. Eventually, branding Kenya and its products will be an easier sell. Every Kenyan will have been involved and therefore owned the efforts. It is the only way we will appreciate our own products and country.

The excess products from each region will be exported to different regions. Continued production will lead to external exports for a country, which today imports much more than it exports. We may finally become an export oriented country like Singapore and other Asian tigers. In fact, every six out of 10 business entities in Singapore are export oriented.

Incidentally, those countries have long benefited from dumping cheap products into our own country. The Ministry of Trade and Industry and Kenya Bureau of Standards must now flex their muscles. They should protect Kenya from dumping of cheap imports. They should at the same time promote production of high quality commodities, in line with acceptable International Standards. This, I believe will be an important role for them in branding Kenya. Are you there and wishing to start branding Kenya following a bottom up approach?

Naturally, those views (or dreams) are valuable today just like they were, when conceptualized in November 2006. That was long before the advent of the Brand Kenya Board as well as the demarcation of our nation into 47 counties.

Effectively, the county governments have their branding strategy already conceived. Likewise, Brand Kenya Board has its job cut out. Ultimately, this nation demands well thought out, holistic and long term strategies, for it to continually build up towards successful achievement of the aspirations of vision 2030. Most importantly, control measures of reversing the tragic culture of importing everything, must be put in place as much as is practically possible.

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