

For the EAC to succeed, put the money on the young

Historically, the East African Community (EAC) was made up of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda when it was formed in 1967 until it collapsed in 1977.

Its revival in 2000 has seen it grow to eight countries, including Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The estimated population of the regional block is about 331 million people, according to futures.issafrica.org. Sixty-five percent of this population is under the age of 30. Sixty-five percent of the people live in rural areas, practicing agriculture. It is a young and primarily rural population in nature. The GDP of the region is about \$353 billion.

Interestingly, the USA has a population of about 340 million people and is arguably the world's most lucrative market with a GDP of about \$31.82 trillion.

The numbers for East Africa are good but will only get better if it becomes a 'quality population'. One with incomes that create effective demand and act as an incentive for local production. It is easier to sell at home than in markets elsewhere because of preferential tariffs, fewer non-tariff barriers, and less stringent quality standards.

The major purpose of regional bodies like the EAC is to transform societies majorly through growth and development of economies. The people get to work, produce, earn, and consume whatever they need. This is better achieved if what they demand is produced in the region.

The reality is that most of what we earn in the EAC goes outside the region, especially to China, from where we import everything literally. We consume especially high value products like electronics, cars, clothes, medicines and medical equipment, machinery, phones, computers, and ICT infrastructure, etc.

One of the best ways to benefit from the EAC is, first and foremost, investment in the young and energetic population. They have to be trained and equipped with relevant skills for modern production. They also have to be kept in good health and saved from the dangers of HIV infection. The prevalence rates on average are about 5.9 percent among young adults.

They used to say that darkness is an aphrodisiac. Idleness is a much worse stimulant. Poor young people who become sexually active early will become parents very early. They are going to produce poor children who may not get a chance at education or a good quality life. Current adolescent pregnancy prevalence rates stand at about 55 percent.

Yet more than 50 percent of the young people in the EAC aged between 15 and 35 are either unemployed or engage in precarious or often informal work. In this, you may include artisanal mining, sports betting, prostitution, and at the extreme end, crime. A good number have resorted to voting with their feet to do menial labour in the Middle East under very difficult conditions. Many desperate ones from Somalia have been reported among those who have drowned while crossing the Mediterranean to go to Europe. Yet others have been sighted in the Ukraine-Russian war.

Going by what we witnessed in Kenya with the Gen Z uprisings from 2024, to the violent post-election clampdowns in Tanzania in 2025, to the continuous fight between the Uganda government and the Opposition since 2019. Add the instability in Somalia, South Sudan, the endless wars in DRC, and the ethnic tensions in Rwanda and Burundi, we have a ticking time bomb on our hands.

All the infrastructure we are investing in can, like happened in places like Libya, go up in flames and

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Nicholas Sengoba
Plainly speaking



end up as debris.

Granted, money is very hard to come by, and a lot of what we collect is pilfered through corruption plus waste. But there is hope.

At the just concluded 25th Summit of the EAC Heads of State, the alarm bells were rung about member states owing monies to the block. As of January, the outstanding amounts stand at \$89.3 million. There was a suggestion that member states pay their own members of the legislative assembly.

In my opinion, we should go further. Shut down the Legislative Assembly in its current state and create a virtual parliament to cut down on expenditure on travel and accommodation. (A brother of mine works there, and this will not amuse him). A regional block does not necessarily need to have a legislature like the European Union to afford a few politicians an opportunity to sponge off society. The countries in Europe can afford this luxury. Their forefathers colonised countries around the world and stole a lot of resources while using cheap labour from slavery to become

prosperous. The long tales about hard work are disingenuous and economical with the truth.

Alternatively, we may have the Chinese model where once every five years, Heads of State and all their advisors, plus the MPs, meet, review the progress, and set out plans and objectives for the next five years. In the same vein, close down the East African Community Court. In most member states, its decisions are not enforceable, and thus, it remains redundant.

The savings may then be channelled towards joint manufacturing and services by the member states to employ mainly young people, because the future belongs to them.

The dividend here in increasing production not only saves on the importation bill, but has the capacity of creating flourishing businesses and employment if we keep ploughing back whatever benefits accrue from them.

The current model that relies mainly on foreign investors has the challenge of repatriating earnings outside the individual member states and the community as a whole. It does not achieve much because even the pay to labour, which would count as what remains in the EAC, is usually very low, almost exploitative, and does not improve the productivity of young people.

The EAC in the 60s and 70s achieved a lot in terms of common services like the airways, railways, banking, ports, and harbours, etc. The current fashion is in spending excessively on the political side, with huge conferences and meetings. Let the money flow from politics to matters that help young people achieve their potential by putting their skills to gainful employment.

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