

Opinion

On Visionless ‘Visions’ and the Need to Transcend Tantalizing Myths

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It is over three years since President Museveni launched *Vision 2040* for Uganda. We need to revisit this ‘vision’ in light of recent plans (or hopes?) to ‘transform’ Uganda into a middle-income country by 2020 which is also part of the larger ‘Vision 2040’.

On the cover of this ‘vision’ document, Uganda’s territorial map appears partitioned into eleven segments, representing artistic impressions of transformations expected in key sectors by 2040. In the upper section, we have super-fast trains, space missions and mega-power installations.

In the middle section, we have high-tech-based education and learning, high-tech medical facilities, super-highways, etc. To the bottom of the map, we have high-energy industrial complexes, massive monocultures and tourism. All these encompass a vision that by 2040, Uganda will be an icon of modernity in the region of ‘mass poverty’ – if we employ for the moment the economists’ *ceteris paribus* logic in other sub-Saharan African countries.

This envisioning of our society-to-be has gone too far to the extent that now, as part of the bigger vision, it is hoped that Uganda will be made ‘middle-income’ in about four years from now. What a socio-engineering dream!

Reactions to this ‘vision’ have ranged from enthusiasm, wonder, and hope to skepticism (how will all these fine-tuned dreams be translated into actual realities given our current predicament? If a single cancer machine can cause a national crisis of sorts, what are you talking about beyond wishful thinking?). There have also been questions regarding how different this vision will be from others that preceded it.

But one may also ask: what do we actually want?

A few points can be highlighted from our ‘Vision 2040’. First, ‘Vision 2040’ envisages ‘A transformed Ugandan society from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country within 30 years’.

The methods for implementing and tracking progress towards achieving that ‘vision’ include the five-year National Development Plans (NDPs) which are now in their second phase. Each NDP has specific targets, sub-visions within the larger ‘Vision 2040’.

The ongoing NDP II is expected to move the country from a humiliating backward bracket to, at least, a lower middle-income bracket by 2020.



President Museveni launching the *Uganda Vision 2040* a decade ago.

This means, according to this measure, Ugandans’ income per capita has to increase from its current \$676 to around \$1,039 by 2020. This is expected to hit the desired goal of \$9,500 by 2040! Absolute poverty, unemployment, illiteracy levels, low life expectancy, low industrial production, mortality rates of different kinds, low access to essential services, widespread corruption, and many more will be brought down to their knees by 2040, thanks to the ‘vision’ of our neo-Marxists-turned neo-liberals!

I think it is misleading to call this so-called ‘Vision’ a vision. Just like the initial ten-point programme, the originality of this ‘vision’ is contestable. Its content manifests sheer visionlessness, for it is, at best, blind belief in and religious following of those assumed to have developed.

The grander assumption is that we need to, or even must, catch up with those above us on the imagined universal linear scale of growth/progress/development. Of course this assumption dates back to the colonial demeaning rhetoric. The means of getting there is obvious economic growth. This is expected to trickle down to the ordinary citizens like my grandmother in Mityana even as this kind of thinking is no longer advanced uncritically within mainstream economics. Such thinking has been overtaken by realities, just like the idea that the invisible hand can independently work infinite socio-economic miracles.

But, above all, the grander myth that all countries in the world can, one day, become exactly like the United States or some European countries has not only been challenged for its impossibility (planet Earth cannot provide the resource inputs and dumping sites needed to run such a world), it has also been challenged for its

undesirability. (The idea that we should all live life the same way, dream the same way and aspire for similar things is, to say the least, a profitable ideological tool to impose one’s way of life onto others.)

It should be concerning to all of us that our own ‘leaders’ are steering us towards this direction. Towards a direction where questions about who we are, how we live, what we aspire for in life and how we view the world and our place(s) in it become a preserve for ‘experts’.

Moreover, ‘experts’ from far! Towards a direction where we shall completely give up self-definition, hence embracing models and worldviews that only tell us about how inferior, underdeveloped and poor we are. Models which tell us that the only way to escape our humiliating condition is to follow.

Yet those who produce these models for us ‘to catch up’ are not waiting. They are ‘competitors’ in this race-to-nowhere, running farther and farther, meaning that our position in the race will be permanent, with all the implications it has to who we are as a people, and our place in this world.

Nothing seems to have been learnt from our own historical experience. Neither from the experience of those with whom we share those imposed categories of ‘low income’, ‘third world’, ‘underdeveloped’, ‘poor’, ‘backward’ and so on.

Categories which many of our foreparents fought to reject during colonial struggles are now being deployed against us freely by our own ‘leaders’ – hence intents to modernize, transform, etc. The question is whether, as a people, we are ready to move on like this. Whether we are going to accept to be permanently kept in a tantalized mode, as visionless ‘visions’ come and go. In the past you, were promised prosperity for all; ten years later, it is hand hoes and sanitary pads. What will tomorrow’s promise be!

I think we need courage to think progressively on the question of which direction we need to take. What do we actually want? Forget about all these tantalizing ‘visions’ that seek to transform lives of people who were never consulted.

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