United Nations’ Technical Assistance to the Frontier Counties of Kenya

A Brief Concept Note

Background

Since independence in 1963, communities in Kenya’s frontier counties of the North (Garissa, Isiolo, Mandera, Marsabit, Turkana; and Wajir) have suffered from fragility, instability, socioeconomic marginalization, volatility, vulnerability, poverty and insecurity. The rationale for focusing on counties in Northern Kenya is based on the fact that, like any other border and fragile regions, they suffer from “Fragility, driven by political exclusion, violence, socio-economic inequalities as well as poor institutions, infrastructure, and poor service delivery systems increasing frequency of high-magnitude disasters caused by natural and man-made hazards and protracted conflicts.”¹ These regions are relatively underdeveloped compared to other regions of Kenya. To redress the problem of underdevelopment, poverty, regional and social inequalities as well as poor governance, Kenya embarked on devolved system of government that is expected to provide equal opportunities to all citizens by creating conditions that would encourage their input in their respective counties’ development and governance. The promulgation of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 on 27 August 2010 provided for the setting up of 47 County Governments and devolved power to the counties to bring both decision-making, services and financial resources closer to the people and to enhance citizen’s participation on local development. Devolution has immensely benefited the frontier counties and improved their socioeconomic conditions. However, the frontier counties are still faced with myriad challenges, including lack of capacity in policy design and analysis, conflict and climate induced disasters that have, profound impacts on food security, water, health, agriculture and natural resources of the region.

Generally, the recurrent drought and insecurity reinforces each other; drought exacerbates underlying tensions, while insecurity deepens vulnerability by curtailing access to rangelands and services and destroying assets. Lamu and Tana River counties also share similar experiences. These counties lack sufficient infrastructure necessary for development, e.g. transport infrastructure, health facilities, education facilities and security.

Amidst all these low indices, the frontier Counties have immense potentials for development. One of the main resource is the youth. The Kenya’s youth bulge is a blessing, but could also be a risk for stability if not managed well. In the in the frontier Counitites in particular, the population of youth have doubled over the last decade, but opportunities to match that growth have not been available. Unemployment, lack of opportunities and better education is said to push a number of them to join extremist groups and engage

in criminal activities. If the growing youth population is not engaged in productive socio-economic activities, instead of bestowing a demographic dividend, it could threaten stability and turn into a demographic time bomb.

As Kenya develops and moves to become an upper middle-income economy, it cannot ignore the vast natural resources Northern Region of Kenya is endowed with. For too long, the region has been the passive recipient of emergency aid, food aid from the Government and local and international humanitarian agencies. The cost in terms of human misery as a result partly of the tumultuous historical legacy of Northern Kenya requires nothing less than a massive joint transformation effort, bringing together all the major development partners and the United Nations. Caught in a trap of resource conflicts over grazing land and water resources, climate change, burgeoning populations, narrow clan-based and violent politics, highly porous borders leading to proliferation of small arms, the population is vulnerable to incitement by clandestine, criminal and terrorist groups.

while devolution is unquestionably a positive development for previously marginalized parts of Kenya (such as the Frontier Counties), it could also be a source of instability. Contestation over the various new leadership positions, newly established boundaries and control of substantial county budgets, could be a potential trigger for violent conflicts. Peace and stability, and civic education towards good governance are therefore the nerves for accelerated economic and social development.

**Frontier Counties Development Council (FCDC)**

FCDC is an intergovernmental agency first created through a Memorandum of Understanding among the County Governments of Garissa, Isiolo, Lamu, Mandera, Marsabit, Tana River and Wajir on 2nd March 2016, committing each County to be a member of FCDC. FCDC was thereafter registered as a company limited by guarantee (not for profit) under the Companies Act 2015. The registered directors are appointed representatives of the seven member counties. This is pursuant to Article 189(2) of the Constitution of Kenya 2010. Further, the member Counties are in the process of legislating FCDC as an Act of their respective County Assemblies. FCDC is part of the institutions under the Council of Governors.

FCDC aims to accelerate the socio-economic development of its member counties, increasing its trade, tourism and investments, encouraging private enterprise, and advancing efforts towards peace and development. It also acts as the member Counties’ coordinating office for Kenya Vision 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals, and related programs and projects to ensure its participation in the national priority development initiatives. The purpose of FCDC is to serve as a catalyst in promoting, integrating and sustaining peace and socio-economic development in its member counties with the participation and involvement of its people.

**Role of the UN**

The United Nations is a trusted partner in Kenya, supporting the Government to achieve its development goals. Like other development and humanitarian partners in Kenya, the UN continues to focus on supporting the Government of Kenya to promote enhanced opportunities
for the citizens through supporting programs in good governance for equity, social cohesion and peacebuilding, health and nutrition, water and sanitation, improved livelihoods through all-inclusive economic growth and better education for all, and energy, environment and climate-change adaptation.

The UN position in Kenya makes it play a catalytic role in helping the Kenya Government in the realization of vision 2030 and SDGs where “no one is left behind”. As such, it is critical for the UN system in Kenya to jointly help in the design and implementation of an integrated programming in these Frontier Counties. In partnership with other development partners (the World Bank, European Union, etc.), the Government of Kenya, and the seven County Governments that are members of the FCDC, there is great potential for the UN to transform these Frontier Counties achieve the following overarching goals;

- Promotion of peace, security and preventing violent extremism, values and good governance;
- Pursuit of high, sustainable and equitable economic growth;
- Poverty reduction through employment generation and reduction of social vulnerability;
- Protection of the environment and promotion of climate-friendly technologies and sound agricultural practices;
- Promoting health care services; and
- Transforming technical, vocational and education to produce the right kind of skills and expanding access to technology, applications, innovation and networks.