In the previous article we identified a number of key gaps in the promise of Kenya as Silicon Savannah and the reality on the ground. We need a structured approach to close these gaps. Indeed, as the old adage holds, *ukiona vyalea vimeundwa*.

The **National Innovation Forum**, scheduled for 2nd and 3rd of March 2015 is expected to focus on how to close the gaps between promise and reality. It is also anticipated that the Forum would become an annual event focused on the ICT innovation space. Done well, it could become a "book of record" of and track progress with respect to ICT innovation in the country..

The economic targets set for the ICT sector include an 8% contribution to the GDP and creation of 180,000 jobs by 2017. This task is too urgent to wait for sectorial reforms that encompass the entire economy. It is important that focus on the sector not be lost and that which can be accomplished be done as a matter of urgency.

These targets are achievable numbers with collaboration between the private and public sectors with respect to planning and execution. There is a need to understanding the common goals and clear roles and responsibilities for both sectors.

This would lead to the creation of a conducive environment that can nurture innovation. We need policies and regulations that promote Kenyan ICT products and services, especially with respect to public procurement; "support Kenyan ICT to, promote Kenya" should be the mantra!

Our academic institutions must (of necessity) produce talent that is in tune with market needs, while collaborating with industry in research and development initiatives. Indeed, our academic institutions need to be forward-looking in a manner that is responsive to market skills demand.

Capital and funding for initiatives need to be readily available, and streamlined in favour of innovation. We need mechanisms that can encourage more risk capital and ready access to ICT innovators.

Further, we need to actively promote Kenyan ICT products and services regionally and internationally. One can envision a case where national trade delegations routinely incorporate ICT sector representation.

Results can only be realized through orchestrated efforts, complete with plans, targets, performance measures and accountability. The approach should be based on collaboration between the public and private sectors. Moreover, the initiative should be supported from the highest offices in the nation. Key to these are the President and Cabinet Secretary of the Ministry of Information Communication and Technology.

In planning the future of ICT innovation and its potential contribution to the economy, we need to look at the promise of the **Science, Technology and Innovation Act of 2012.** The Act, which was formally assented to by President Mwai Kibaki in January 2013, providing a good foundation for national innovation in general. It creates

the National Commission for Science Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), Kenya National Innovation Agency (KENIA) and the National Research Fund (NRF).

NACOSTI's mandate centres on regulation and quality assurance in the Science, Technology and Innovation. On the other hand, KENIA's main objective is to develop and manage the Kenya National Innovation System, while NRF's charged with mobilizing finance the advancement of science, technology and innovation in the country.

The foregoing notwithstanding, we can also learn from the experience of others where the ICT sector has thrived. In Ireland for instance, **Enterprise Ireland** drives the entire ICT innovation value chain, from idea to testing to funding and maturity. It has components of support for marketing and skills development.

A similar entity (call it **Enterprise Kenya**) in Kenya would identify, nurture and facilitate the ICT innovation value chain. It would coordinate initiatives for competition, information sharing, and access to capital and marketing the products. It would work closely with governments (both national and county) to promote the support of Kenyan ICT products and services. It would, on an ongoing basis, spark conversations on the talent landscape.

The entity would also explore opportunities for commercialization, be these from the public, private sectors or academia. As an example, one could consider commercializing the Huduma Centres concept: the designs, software and accompanying services. This would entail securing associated intellectual property (products, processes and services) and packing these for offer to other countries that may be in need.

The country needs an **ICT-focused Equity Fund** as means of providing access to capital for ICT innovations. Unlike the **National Research Fund** envisioned in the Science, Technology and Innovation Act of 2012 the Equity Fund would focus mainly on commercialization of ICT products. The Equity Fund would be an arms-length quasi-public entity that would invest in targeted promising innovations.

For capitalization, the government, working with the private sector, could provide initial funding and hence help jumpstart the Fund's activity. With success of funded innovations, the government stands to reap returns in terms of growth in equity of financed enterprises while enhancing economic growth. Over time, and once the sector is steady, the government could divest from the Fund.

It is important that the Presidency and the Ministry of ICT continually engage with players in the sector to ensure that the processes established work and that there is meaningful progress with respect to ICT initiatives. One can envision a **Presidential Task Force on ICT Innovation** (perhaps combining with the recently launched Presidential Digital Talent Programme) domiciled at the Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology and working very closely with the ict.go.ke ICT Authority.

The Task Force would continually work with the ICT sector to ensure government support in the innovation value chain. It would regularly report on the state of ICT innovation in the country, capturing associated achievements, challenges and means to overcome those challenges.

There will also be an advocacy role for the Task Force, including popularising ICT innovation in schools, tertiary training institutions as well as universities. Working with other entities (such as the proposed Enterprise Kenya) in the innovation space, the Task Force would create an innovation index, track on the index and identify direct achievements realized through ICT innovation.

Further, we need to make ICT innovation as part of the parliamentary agenda. Both houses of parliament need to be involved, both from awareness and reporting perspectives. In doing so, they should make ICT innovation part of their agenda and require status updates on the date on a regular basis.

There is more.

There are many lessons that can be learnt from past, ongoing and future projects such as Huduma, the eCitizen, National Payment Gateway, IFMIS, etc. Procurement policy should not only require a minimum percentage of local participation but also provide for knowledge transfer to help build local capacity. In the end, we can generate substantial intellectual property from such projects while also (potentially) supporting co-innovation as a result of joint ventures and participation.

Finally, we need to institutionalize the **National Innovation Forum** as an annual event with focus on issues of ICT innovation and as a show case for innovators. At the Forum, we would demonstrate successes, share challenges, solutions to those challenges and lessons learnt. It is possible that the Forum could be a culmination of nation-wide county activities of similar kind starting at the grassroots in the counties.

Now that would be an ICT reawakening and a drive towards the promise of Kenya as a Silicon Savannah!

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