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The Rise and Fall of Lokichoggio Town

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Urbanization in Kenya has faced numerous challenges. Especially, a decline in humanitarian operations in towns located at the borders. This article examines Lokichoggio town's urban growth and challenges that eventually led to the fall of the town. The article argues that Lokichoggio town began to experience growth due to numerous non-governmental organizations set up in the town. This was done particularly to assist victims of the Sudan civil war. Lokichoggio was later abandoned due to inactive airports, poor urban planning, insecurity and competition from Kakuma and Lodwar towns that now offer affordable accommodation and conference services. The collapse of the luxury hotels, as well as the abandoned compounds of the International Committee of the Red Cross amongst other non-governmental organizations that are struggling to stay afloat greatly affected the economic growth of the town, since a lot of economic activities were pegged on the existence of humanitarian organizations. The article also highlights other urban challenges facing Lokichoggio and finally proposes developments meant to ensure the sustainable development of the town. Current developments being witnessed in the town critique modernization theory which posits that modernization is a unilinear process. The urbanization process of Lokichoggio has not been a unilinear process.

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses factors leading to the rise of Lokichoggio. In addition, it discusses challenges that the town has continued to witness over time leading to its fall. Proposed developments meant to ensure the sustainable development of the town are also discussed. The first part of this article shows that the setting up of non-governmental organizations based in Lokichoggio was the leading cause for the growth of Lokichoggio town. This means that the numerous non-governmental organizations in Lokichoggio necessitated many economic activities that acted as a source of livelihood for the area residents. Urban challenges affecting Lokichoggio town are also discussed. Far from the shifting of major non-governmental organizations' activities to Lodwar and Kakuma town respectively, the town has also experienced other urban challenges such as insecurity, poor urban planning and inaccessibility of the town via Lokichoggio airport. These urban challenges are discussed in detail. Measures put in place to revive the town and ensure its continued growth are also discussed in detail.

Sudan Civil Wars and the Growth of Lokichoggio

Migration of displaced people is considered the main factor leading to urbanization in northern Kenya. Forced migration from neighbouring countries such as South Sudan and Somalia has seen the northern part of Kenya adopt a unique kind of urbanization. This is urbanization associated with refugees' influx and the presence of both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Such is the case of Lokichoggio town, situated in northwestern Kenya. Sudan has for a long time continued to experience security issues that have over time escalated to civil wars.

The wars in Sudan are often characterized by fights between the central government and the people who mainly raise concerns of marginalization. Marginalization in Sudan is mainly in terms of resource distribution, and religion that is between Christians and Muslims. Hamilton points out the exploitative nature of the government of Sudan as a root cause of conflict.¹ According to him, the conflict in Sudan is purely a conflict over resources. Hamilton's argument was however countered by Bassam who argued that Sharia laws imposed on non-Muslim Sudanese peoples in September 1983 resulted in jihadism against non-Muslims.² This resulted in instability in Southern Sudan, as this area is largely occupied by Christians.

The 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement brought the first civil war in Sudan to an end. Part of the agreement stated that the South should have religious and cultural autonomy.³ To try and avert another civil war, the agreements signed in 1972 were incorporated into the Sudan constitution. The peace witnessed in Sudan was short-lived as the 1972 agreement was later broken. The violation of the Addis Ababa agreement came when President Nimeiry declared all of Sudan an Islamic state and this led to the second civil war in Sudan.⁴

The second Sudanese civil war took place from 1983 to 2005. The conflict in Darfur began as a civil war. It was known as the Arab- Fur war. In 1983, the Sudan People's Liberation Army was formed as a rebel group. This rebel group was formed as a movement of all oppressed Sudanese citizens, who were mainly from South Sudan. Its main aim was to reestablish an autonomous Southern Sudan and to criticize the central government for policies that were leading to national disintegration.⁵ The Arab- Fur war began

¹ J. Hamilton, *"The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars"* (Oxford, Kampala, Nairobi: International African Institute) pp. 23-30

² T Bassam, "Political Islam, World Politics and Europe" (London: Routledge Publisher, 2008). p. 33.

³ K. DeRouen, & UK. Heo, *"Civil wars of the World: Major Conflicts since World War"* (California: ABC-CLIO), p744

⁴ B. Raftopoulos and K. Alexander, *Peace in the balance: The crisis in Sudan*. (South Africa: African Minds. 2006) pp.12-13.

⁵ Ibid. pp.15-20.

as a civil war which the government was not a part of. The war persisted in spite of several reconciliation conferences convened to halt it. The government became a part of the conflict only after 1989, through an initiative that tried to address the basic cause of the conflict. The government initiative failed and the conflict erupted on a bigger scale, reaching a new level with the Massalit confrontation with Arab tribes in 1995⁶ The 1987-1989 conflict ended abruptly when the elected government in Khartoum was overthrown and the leaders of the Islamist coup cited previous government's failure to stop the fighting in Darfur as one of the reasons for their action.⁷ The conflict in Sudan resulted in violence and mass displacement of people.

Conflict in Sudan erupted again in 2002, when relations were forged through two separate initiatives one in which local rebels (SLA) linked up with the southern opposition that is the Sudan People's Liberation Army. What began as a local conflict took on broader dimensions as the government got involved in 1995 and the opposition in 2003. The post-2003 conflict turned into an all-Sudan affair even if it played out only in Darfur.⁸ Krause asserts that violence and instability lead to suffering and the outward flow of displaced people.⁹ The situation in Sudan was a no-brainer. Many victims of the Sudan conflict migrated to Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda respectively. The humanitarian situation in Sudan was dire and this prompted non-governmental organizations to establish their bases in Lokichoggio town.

Having a base in Lokichoggio was viewed as a better option because it was safe and accessible by air as there was the Lokichoggio airport and the town is situated in Turkana West just 30 kilometres from the Kenya-South Sudan border. According to Lomurukai who has lived in

Lokichoggio for five decades, the town used to host more than forty non-governmental organizations who were providing humanitarian services to victims of the civil war between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement Army.¹⁰ He attributes major developments witnessed in the town as being the results of the input from non-governmental organizations who had come to the aid of Sudanese refugees. Lomurukai's sentiments were also consistent with the ones in the Daily Nation which stated that during Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), thirty-five non-governmental Organizations as well as the United Nations agencies mainly UNICEF and World Food Programme were situated in Lokichoggio.¹¹ In fact, humanitarian tourism was considered the main driving force for urbanization in Lokichoggio.

Many investors flocked to the town, and businesses were set up to satisfy both the locals' and humanitarian tourists' needs. Many entertainment joints mushroomed in the town as these were the meeting points where locals largely interacted with new entrants in the town. Bii, a trader in the town vividly recalled the vibrant days when her hotel was always fully booked. She nostalgically recalled making huge profits that made it possible for her to employ twenty permanent workers, a situation which has since changed. She further asserted that since the relocation of major non-governmental organizations from the town, she barely makes half the amount of money she used to make.¹² Once a vibrant haven for workers of various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Lokichoggio is now a ghost town. The town is characterized by old dilapidated structures, charred buildings that do not conform to the

⁶ M. Mamdani, " *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, (CODESRIA, 2010) pp.250- 276

⁷ Ibid pp. 276-286

⁸ P.M Holt and M.W. Daly, " *A History of the Sudan*," (USA: Longman Inc, 1961) pp.167-217

⁹ J. Krause, "Stabilization and Local Conflicts: Communal and Civil War in South Sudan". *Journal International Peace Keepings* 18 (5): (2019).pp. 478-493

¹⁰ Lomurukai, OI, 18 May 2024

¹¹ The Daily Nation, Once a Vibrant haven for NGO workers, now a ghost town. 01 March, 2024

¹² Bii, OI, 20 May 2024

standards of the town and dusty streets with vandalized street lights.

Other factors leading to the growth of Lokichoggio

In its heyday, Lokichoggio town used to be accessible with many visitors flying in and out of the town. Lokichoggio airport was too busy with both passenger and cargo flights from different parts of the world flying in. Then, planes used to land in Lokichoggio from Germany and the United Kingdom without connecting from Nairobi. Numerous hotels situated in various parts of Lokichoggio used to accommodate these visitors with some even assisting their visitors with flight services.¹³ The once busy airstrip now rarely sees a plane. Tukoo recalled the good times when roads headed to the border were busy with trucks ferrying aids. She noted that times have changed and that it was almost possible to count vehicles using the route on a daily basis.¹⁴ Ekuwam who worked as a security guard in one of the hotels, recalled the good old days when the town was beaming with life. Then, pastoral communities in Turkana traded their livestock to hotels.¹⁵ He further asserted that life was good as they were able to educate their children comfortably and they required no aid from the government, as they do now.¹⁶

Far from the accessibility of Lokichoggio, the town was secure. For a long time, Lokichoggio enjoyed good security both night and daytime security. Good security coupled with good transport and communication systems led to an influx of immigrants and non-governmental organizations into the town. Many immigrants were fleeing from insecurity in their countries. However, the relocation of non-governmental organizations from Lokichoggio was hastened by an insecurity incident in 2008 when a

Zimbabwean aid worker working for the Un World Food Program was shot dead.¹⁷

Impacts of the Departure of the NGO's on Lokichoggio

Many years of NGO's presence in Lokichoggio had seen the economy of the town greatly reliant on refugee activities. Literally, Lokichoggio was living by the rhythm of non-governmental organizations' activities in the town. Wanjiru, a retired teacher, similarly described Lokichoggio as a town that collapsed the moment non-governmental organizations relocated to Sudan. Many economic activities in the town were pegged on non-governmental organizations activities and this explains why the town has become inactive, now unable to attract key investors.¹⁸ She further noted that potential investors have equally moved out of the town for Lodwar town. Indeed the impacts of refugees on urbanization in northern Kenya is undeniable. Lokichoggio, a once thriving town that depended on refugee programming has witnessed a decline in its fortunes following the closure of refugee operations.

Mutiso, a hotelier in the town, during the interview, observed that Lokichoggio was once bubbling with activities but became rife with hopelessness.¹⁹ The once busy structures now lie empty with little to no activities taking place. In fact, many houses in the town remain unoccupied and this has forced homeowners to give houses to locals for their stay so as to make sure that they are safe. The 1999 census reported the population in Lokichoggio to be 22,984 respectively. Notably, the 2019 census reports a lower population for Lokichoggio as the population was estimated to be 13,581 people.²⁰ The decline in population in Lokichoggio is linked to the economic decline and out-migration caused by the closure of refugee assistance operations in the town. More so, when non-governmental

¹³ Lenakukuya, OI, 07 May. 2024

¹⁴ Tukoo, OI, 09 May 2024

¹⁵ Ekuwam, OI, 12 May 2024

¹⁶ Ekuwam, OI, 12 May 2024

¹⁷ Bii, OI, 20 May 2024

¹⁸ Wanjiru, OI, 20 May 2024

¹⁹ Mutiso, OI, 18 May 2024

²⁰ T. Brinkhoff, City Population Data. online access(2021)11/03/2021)

organizations left the town, locals failed to maintain the town's standards and this has kept many visitors at bay. In addition, the government's attention towards this region was drawn off when the borders of Southern Sudan were opened and non-governmental organizations left the town. In fact, plans to develop the area were put on hold indefinitely and Lokichoggio became a town of direct and dilapidated buildings and people who had lost hope. During the study, people of Lokichoggio often referred to themselves as "*Emuriakin*" meaning people who were forgotten.²¹

According to Kenya's Refugees Act 2014, every person who has applied for recognition of his status as a refugee and every member of his family shall remain in the designated refugee camp until the processing of their status is concluded. However, the amended security laws of 2014 sought to reduce the number of refugees drastically by stating that the number of refugees or asylum seekers shall not exceed one hundred and fifty thousand persons²² the impacts of refugees both positive and negative are still greatly felt. Lokitela, an engineer and former employee in one of the non-governmental organization's bases, emotionally told of how the fall of Lokichoggio claimed the life of his close friend. He emotionally recalled how this friend passed on as a result of trauma and pressure resulting from unserviced loans. He went on to assert that he was able to survive this kind of pressure due to the support of his wife and the small investments he had made. According to him, those who did not have extra savings and little investments succumbed to pressure.²³

Rahiel, an immigrant from Sudan, recalled the heydays of Lokichoggio when she relocated from Sudan to Lokichoggio. She explained that then, she made enough money for her stay, savings and also for the support of her family back home. Since the collapse of the town's main economic

activity, she barely makes enough for her survival. Life has never been any better in fact, she disclosed that she was planning on returning back to her home country.²⁴ Her departure from Lokichoggio would follow the departure of many as the town has been witnessing massive depopulation over the years. Due to the inadequate circulation of money within the town, other Lokichoggio residents who could no longer afford the basic commodities including food opted to go back to their villages and that included her. She reluctantly recalled some good old friends who she worked with some who were her neighbours but have since relocated from the area.²⁵

Now with no sound of the numerous tracks ferrying humanitarian aid to South Sudan and with most buildings disserted, dirty and with cattle grazing in the once busy streets of the town, the town seems to be a shell of its former self. Even the evening ladies who earned their living from working in the town moved to other towns. Ekicheche working as a tailor in the town, gave chilling examples of everyday signs that show that the town was still on a decline despite government efforts to revive the once vibrant town.²⁶ Walking past the town one couldn't help but notice traces of the past as numerous restaurants and lodges still stand tall in the town. Today the town mainly offers accommodation and other services to people travelling to Southern Sudan for employment or even business.²⁷ In other words, the departure of non-governmental institutions from Lokichoggio eroded many good things that the town was known for.

Lokichoggio Town's other setbacks

Apart from the departure of NGO's, Lokichoggio town has in recent years experienced a lot of setbacks. The town experiences the challenge of poor urban planning. Lokichoggio town has vast lands largely owned by individuals. The management of the town has not laid clear

²¹ Chepkaitany, OI, 21 May 2024

²² Republic of Kenya. *Security Laws (Amendment) Act No. 19 of. 2014*. Kenya Law Reports.

²³ Lokitela, OI, May 2024

²⁴ Rahiel, OI, 10 May. 2024

²⁵ Rahiel, OI, 11 May 2024

²⁶ Ekicheche, OI, 15 May 2024

²⁷ Eloto, OI, 12 May 2024

guidelines on the minimum standards necessary for the development of the town. This has seen the construction of substandard structures within the town. The once-busy town is currently unappealing to both locals and investors from outside. From the outlook, Lokichoggio town is characterized by corrugated iron sheet structures, wooden buildings, or temporary shades that have given the town a miserable look. The town's glory is gone.

In their heyday, the vibrant and luxurious hotels used to accommodate foreigners directly flying into Lokichoggio. Some sections of the hotels which include Camp North, 748 Hotel, Proland Inn, Trackmark, and Kate Camp were preserved for moneyed visitors that were served by well-paid permanent staff.²⁸ Wanjiku, a former employee at one of the hotels, asserted that the town has experienced a decline in population and trade activities have shrunk as they only have locals, coming into the town.²⁹ Otherwise, most of the hotels remain unoccupied for days. Naserian recalls days when the hotels in the town were highly guarded due to the presence of high-end visitors they were hosting. She nostalgically recalls how locals, NGO officials and immigrants used to relate freely with locals leading to the establishment of the many entertainment joints. When life was good, she posits that she used to make at least 100,000 Kenyan Shilling a month from the sale of goats to the hotels for consumption. Things have changed since money left together with the NGOs and now she barely makes 5,000 Kenyan Shilling a month.³⁰ There is no adequate money in circulation in circulation in the town.

The poor condition of the roads, airstrip and lighting system is another problem facing Lokichoggio town. The streets of Lokichoggio are poorly maintained and they mirror well the negligence of the town's amenities. The streets are dusty and poorly maintained and this is clearly

witnessed in Lokichoggio's flyover which is full of potholes. Many shops tend to close very early because of the deserted nature of the town and the poor security in the area. In Lokichoggio town, by around nine pm at night, businesses in the town are closed because of the fear of what lies in the darkness.

Insecurity is another daunting factor necessitating the relocation of NGO activities. Lokichoggio is located on arid lands and the area receives an insignificant amount of rainfall. The main economic activity of the communities is pastoralism. With the changing climatic conditions and decrease in pastureland, woes among pastoralist communities will continue to exist. According to Lemartia, a herder living in Lokichoggio, there has been increased conflict in the area due to reduced pastureland.³¹ Moreover, spillover conflicts and conflicts resulting from linkages between neighbouring South Sudan and Kenya continue to exist. Ekuwam noted that there was a need to beef up both internal and cross-border security to avert such issues from recurring in future.³²

Proposals meant to revamp Lokichoggio.

The government has proposed a raft of measures that are meant to revive Lokichoggio town. The A1 road and proposed lapsset which could stimulate long-term urban development in Kakuma- Kalobeyei and Lokichoggio is meant to necessitate migration due to economic factors which is more permanent as opposed to forced migration. There are also proposed rehabilitation works in Lokichoggio airport that are meant to reintroduce flights along that route.

CONCLUSION

The departure of NGOs from Lokichoggio greatly affected the rapid growth of the town. It is evident that the numerous NGOs previously situated in Lokichoggio were indeed responsible for the rapid growth of the town. This is so because a lot of

²⁸ The Daily Nation, Once a Vibrant haven for NGO workers, now a ghost town. 01 March, 2024

²⁹ O. I Wanjiku, OI, 13 May 2024

³⁰ O.I Naserian, OI, 15 May 2024

³¹ Lemartia, OI, 18 May 2024

³² Ekuwam, OI, 16 May 2024

activities were pegged on the presence of non-governmental organizations activities in the town. After the mass relocation of NGOs to Sudan, Lodwar and Kakuma, a lot of businesses collapsed with the remaining businesses on their knees. This is because there is no adequate circulation of money in the town. Lokichoggio town is on its way to becoming a ghost town. I propose that the economy and purpose for which the town exists should be diversified to build resilience so that the town continues to exist even after peace is restored in Sudan. This is so because, if nothing is done to diversify the purpose for which Lokichoggio town exists far from being a refugee hub, then this town will totally collapse. Other challenges faced by Lokichoggio include poor urban planning, insecurity and inaccessibility of the town.

Despite numerous challenges attributed to the fall of the once vibrant town, there are proposed developments to revive the town. There have been constant calls to revamp and reconstruct the airstrip to allow easy access to the town. There is also the proposed lapsset which could stimulate long-term urban development in Kakuma-Kalobeyei and Lokichoggio necessitating migration due to economic factors which is more permanent as opposed to forced migration.

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