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# How State can revamp airport passenger clearance operations

Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) dedicates one month, every year, to honour and appreciate taxpayers for their valuable contribution towards revenue collection. This year, KRA dedicated October as the taxpayers' month whereupon they unveiled an online auction system and a tax amnesty programme as a way of giving back to taxpayers.

However, it seems the objectives of the taxpayers' month may have been counterproductive if the recent backlash towards KRA is anything to go by. First, and a fact that was observed by President William Ruto in his speech during the Taxpayers' Day, to a great extent only large taxpayers identify and celebrate the taxpayers' month and day. This means that in the power-interest matrix of the KRA, large taxpayers must be managed closely considering they remain the most valuable stakeholders of the KRA.

On the other hand, medium and small taxpayers, notwithstanding the fact that they form the majority of the stakeholders, have felt harassed and bullied by tax officers. A combination of the cost of fuel, weakening shilling against major hard currencies and complex tax compliance policies make this lot of taxpayers to feel discriminated against. They also have a high mortality rate, which the tax system does not consider.

At this point, it is imperative to note that the contempt and harassment met by many taxpayers is not just unique to KRA, but all public institutions. Therefore, there is a serious need to, first, reexamine our public policies so that they are not used as a justification to discriminate against a majority of the population and, second, retrain public servants to ensure they not only treat the political and elite class with honour, dignity and respect, but all customers that seek their service.

Be that as it may, let us focus our scope to the recent backlash on our Customs Administration for the treatment of travellers at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA). Instructively, JKIA is an important gateway for tourists and cargo into East Africa. In 2022, JKIA was ranked as the seventh busiest airport in Africa with 6.6 million passengers. As such, any negative publicity would have adverse impact on the users. This begs the question, what can be done to fix the system?

First, we need to develop robust risk management system, especially for the Customs Administration, with the capacity to profile high risk travellers and subject them to further scrutiny away from other compliant travellers so as not to spook visitors.

As a guide, the World Customs Organisation, in June 2022, in collaboration with the International Air Transport Association and the International Civil Aviation Organisation developed Guidelines on Advance Passenger Information that established a best practice for the agencies at the airports and other border entry points.

These guidelines, if analysed and domesticated, can help review the workflow of passenger traffic from the airside to the exit points to identify any bottlenecks and dupli-



cation of processes, and develop strategies to address the same.

In practical terms, this would require an inter-agency collaborative effort and time bound clearance targets. As a matter of fact, it is common in many efficient airports around the world to process travellers under green or red channels, with more modern airports having fast-track lanes for those of low risk, who in most cases will have been facilitated with pre-arrival clearance process.

Second, to address the direct concerns raised by many at JKIA, the Customs and Immigration operations should be harmonised into a one-stop system. In doing this, the focus should be on the control of prohibited and restricted items as well as travellers on a watch-list. The Baggage Hall processes should also involve Customer Care officers from the Kenya Tourism Board to assist tourists, especially where there are language barriers, and make them feel welcome right at the point of entry into the country.



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However, it's crucial to have continuous feedback from passengers on their experience at the point of entry.

Third, considering Kenya positions itself as a prime tourist destination, it is prudent to have tourists, especially on charter flights, cleared from the country of origin and only subjected to passport controls at arrival in Kenya. The airport process should involve a dedicated clearance lane for the tourists.

Fourth, like in all critical areas where public services are required, we must invest in technology. It's vital to deploy the latest technologies to detect illicit items in passenger baggage, and where the luggage is to be opened, for the customs officers to wear gloves and handle the passenger with utmost respect. The customs officers must be trained to exercise the highest levels of decorum in handling passengers, who in most cases are jet-lagged and anxious to get to their hotels or residences.

In conclusion, there are enough tools to enable the Customs Administration to carry out its role in a smooth and painless manner. We have a delicate balance of ensuring that tourists and even local travellers enjoy their journey through the airport, while at the same time safeguarding the frontier from illicit trade.

And whereas revenue collection is a major component of customs operations at airports, the key issue is creating a conducive ecosystem for growth in the number of tourists and travellers so that the bottomline grows, and in so doing grows the tax base.

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