

Opening up Western

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By Vincent Moracha

The completion of road projects in Western Kenya this year will usher in a new visage to the economic development of a region whose potential largely remains untapped.

Five roads, whose construction is ongoing, will open up the area for domestic and international tourists, businessmen and the local communities by providing a faster means of transport to Kisumu and other outside markets.

The roads under construction include Bumala-Port Victoria Road (Western), Sh720 million Kisian-Bondo Road (C27), Sh693 million Ndori-Owimbi Road (C28), Sh684 million Katito-Kendu-Bay Road (C19) and Sh350 million Nyamira-Kadongo Road (Nyanza).

Roads and Public Works Assistant Director of Information, Mr Richard Abura, says, for instance, the Ndori-Owimbi-Luanda K'Otieno road will reduce the distance from Mbita town to Kisumu by more than 100 kilometres.

From Mbita town, people can use ferry services for 45 minutes to Luanda K'Otieno then travel by road to Kisumu, which is cheaper when compared to travelling from Kisumu to Mbita through Kendu Bay and Homa Bay by road.

"The roads will ensure cheaper transport fares, faster transportation of passengers and fish from Mbita in Suba District to Kisumu and other markets," he says.

Suba District on which Mfangano Island lies, is the largest producer of fish in Nyanza but lack of roads has been a major drawback for traders who have had to rely on poor infrastructure neglected for a long time.

Island has very little in way of facilities

Poverty has cut off most of the island's residents from the mainland while some have never seen a car.

Auma Akero, 65, a grandmother of six, told Transport last week, for the last 60 years, she had only heard of cars but had never seen one.

"I have never left here for Mbita where there are cars," she says adding she cannot afford the Sh150 fare charged by the boat operators.

A high-powered Government delegation from the Ministry of Roads and Public Works toured Mfangano Island, early February. The tour could serve as the start of economic growth in the region that hitherto has remained a pipe dream.

A Sh10 million ring road commissioned could see residents and visitors for the first time use motor vehicles to travel from one point to another faster on the island.

Smaller than Nairobi, Mfangano Island is densely populated but has no roads, no vehicles and transport was by boat and on foot.

It's far more remote and primitive than Rusinga, with very little in the way of facilities. Tourists access the island by small plane, which lands on a grass strip.

The residents have challenged the Government to introduce ferry services from Mbita to the island to allow smooth flow of people and goods, now that road projects on the mainland are complete.

"The Government spent Sh1million to hire a private ferry service to transport equipment from the mainland to construct the feeder roads on the island," says Abura.

Once access to the island is improved, culture tourists will have an opportunity to experience the ways of life of the people on the island.

The small community on the island will also be seen fishing with a lamp to attract fish, which brings in shoals of fresh water shrimp at night.

Apart from Mfangano's wildlife, there are also interesting prehistoric cave paintings for tourists to sample.

The Government has issued an ultimatum to the contractors, says Abura.

"The contractors should speed up the pace to give the Government a chance to commission the roads in good time this year," he says.

Road had stalled due to under-funding

Roads and Public Works PS, Mr Mohammed M. Mahamud, said during a three-day inspection of the roads that the Government will conduct regular inspections to ensure that the works are completed in good time.

The Bumala-Port Victoria and the Kisian-Bondo Road contracts were awarded to Hyer Bishan Co. Ltd, while the Ndori-Owimbi-Luanda K'Otieno and Nyamira-Kadongo road contracts were awarded to Put-Sarajevo Co. Ltd.

The Katito-Kendu Bay road was awarded to H-Young Co. Ltd. The PS, however, admits that the Kisian-Bondo road has taken a long time to complete as it had stalled in 2004 due to under-funding.

He says that so far the Government has spent Sh714 million on the road but added that plans are at an advanced stage to enter into a new contract that will improve the quality of the road.

"The initial Government idea was to make the road passable which is why the scope changes after 28 kilometres," he says.

He says the Sh693 million Ndori-Owimbi road will be complete by April.

"The contractor has completed 85 per cent of the project.

After finishing, he will embark on phase two, which starts from Owimbi to Luanda K'Otieno at a cost of Sh1 billion," he says.

The Resident Engineer, Mr Paul Onalo, says the works had been delayed by the construction of new box culverts, rocky terrain and flush floods, which swept away the bridge.

Onalo says plans are under way to upgrade the Kendu bay-Homabay stretch to bitumen standards once the contractor completes the Katito-Kendu Bay road.

"Once the designs are complete, the contractor will then move to the Kisii-Kilgoris road," he says.

The roads will also facilitate easy transportation of bananas from Kisii to other parts of the country.

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