Leveraging the Charter Cities Model for Africa's Mineral Resources Towards Sustainable Growth

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Abstract

The concept of charter cities presents an opportunity to develop new cities from scratch with proper planning, design, and implementation to avoid the pitfalls which have befallen orthodox cities. The model may face challenges in the context of Africa where the history of domination and colonisation has made countries suspicious of models premised on partnerships with developed countries. However, researchers have noted the uniqueness of the charter cities model and its potential to enable countries to develop cities that can anchor sustainable economic growth. Concerns remain about implications for inequality, enclave development and inclusivity. This paper explores how the charter cities approach can be adapted to Africa's social, economic and developmental context to maximise natural resources, especially minerals (extractive resources). We argue that this model can enable resource rich communities to benefit from charter cities created around resource rich areas, with foresight to enable post-extraction city sustainability by nurturing other economic activities that are not dependent on the resource deposit. We conclude that for charter cities to achieve the intended impact, strong institutions are necessary backed by good governance and effective regulatory frameworks aligned to regional development frameworks.

Keywords: Southern Africa, Charter cities, mineral/resource extractivism, sustainable economic development, resource governance

1. Introduction

The charter city movement has been strengthened by the urge to achieve economic growth and poverty reduction in response to growing population and rapid urbanization in most countries (Coetzee, 2017). The United Nations (UN) foresees a huge population residing in cities by 2045 and this will be driven by urbanization in India, China and Nigeria (UN-Habitat, 2016). Africa is rich in mineral endowment and many countries are still transitioning from post-colonial resource extraction-dependent economies to industrial-developing economies. African governments are also still experimenting with policy reforms aimed at facilitating national development and re-industrialisation after the limited success of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) advocated for by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) in the late 1990s (Nayyar, 2011).

In this context, the idea that the charter city model can be replicated in different countries to boost economic growth and advance sustainable development is emerging as a potential solution to the challenges posed by orthodox city development. This paper discusses how the charter cities model can be re-tooled to accelerate sustainable economic growth in Africa from development theory and legal perspectives.

The following core section is an analysis on how charter cities can create economic linkages for diversification of economies using the example of the extractives sector and mineral beneficiation. Thereafter, we highlight the conditions necessary for successful adaptation of the charter city model to resource centred cities development. We demonstrate how charter cities can promote structural transformation in domestic industries and deepen value chains for fast economic growth. The paper concludes by positing that charter cities can be a platform for accelerating economic growth through resource extraction that is sustainable, climate resilient, and aligned to the African developmental vision. However, their success is contingent on host governments' ability to establish effective political, legal, and economic institutions conducive for business environment (good governance and the rule of law).

2. Charter Cities

According to Mason and Lutter (2020), charter cities are "new cities with special jurisdiction to create a new governance system focused on enabling economic development" (Spann, 2014). Charter cities thus have autonomy to exercise the administrative roles and duties of the city, including establishment of legal frameworks for commercial regulation, labour laws, dispute resolution and taxation. The Charter Cities Institute (CCI) Governance Handbook provides a roadmap to create ideal charter cities model that are replicable (Lockhart, Mason, and Peterson, 2021). The charter city approach to economic growth was pioneered by Paul Romer (van de Sand, 2019). Romer's idea is premised on the idea that a rich-developed country would administer the governance process of a charter city established in a host (developing) country (Mason and Lutter, 2020).

Such a city would have an autonomous administrative and legal system geared to promote good governance, presumably separate from the national and local government of the host country (van de Sand, 2019). In contrast to Romer's model, the CCI conceives of a modified model which "advocates for a public-private partnerships between the real estate and the host country" to ensure mutual benefits (Mason and Lutter, 2019). The CCI further endorses a charter city model with a higher degree of autonomous jurisdiction to exercise policy experimentation on local level and to make effective economic decisions for sustained economic growth. While an attractive concept, the charter cities idea has received a fair share of criticism ranging from its neo-colonial plumage (van de Sand, 2019; Amavilah, 2011), and potential to delegitimize host governments (Sagar, 2016), and create privileged economic enclaves (Coetzee, 2017) that may not resonate with sustainable development and "leaving no one behind" (Stuart and Woodroffe, 2016).

Charter cities, like special economic zones (SEZs), have the potential to attract foreign direct investments (FDI) through policy reforms designed to create a conducive environment for business (Mason and Lutter, 2020). For instance, charter cities can use industrial policy to target FDIs that are aligned with its industrial strategy to channel investments in identified key economic sectors, grow the industry and create employment (Lockhart, 2021). Given that SEZs have established a track-record, a case should be made why charter cities present a better approach.

It is argued that unlike SEZs, charter cities have more administrative autonomy to make deeper governance reforms (through registration laws, business registration, dispute resolution and other soft-law measures) in various/multiple economic industries and residential zones over a large geographical area (Mason and Lutter, 2020). The assumption is that FDI will bring technology, innovation, knowledge, skills and capital flows crucial for fast economic growth (Zhu, et al., 2021). China successfully adopted the charter city approach in the 1980s through its SEZs which placed emphasis on strong policy reform in governance allowing more delegation of authority to city officials as well as supporting a targeted single industry which resulted in substantially economic growth, mostly in Shenzhen (Lutter, et al., 2021; Mason and Lutter, 2020). Conceptually, SEZs are merely zones within a city where charter cities are broader in their vision, autonomy, and intended outcomes – creation of a whole city beyond a limited economic growth zone (Spann, 2014).

3. Maximining the benefits from resource rich countries.

We chose to focus on the natural resources sector, especially mining, because most resources are finite and non-renewable, hence it is necessary to analyse the ideas of linkages creation through local beneficiation and value chains. For example, minerals are also critical for the achievement of the United Nations Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by African countries that could benefit from an adapted charter city approach (UNEP, 2020). Many African countries have failed to sufficiently mobilize resource extraction in a sustainable way to promote equitable and inclusive development from the local to the national level. Communities living in resource rich areas are marginalized while their resources are plundered, the environments destroyed, and livelihoods disrupted without recourse. Current laws, regulatory institutions, and corporate entities continue a model which facilitates flight of profits and minimal benefits to host countries and local communities. Could the charter city model provide a possible pathway out of this challenge? If suitably adapted, charter cities could provide the opportunity to develop sustainable cities in areas that are resource rich and eliminate the parasitic nature of current resource extortion models where resource rich areas are exploited to benefit far off cities.

4. Mineral beneficiation

Africa is rich in natural resources, especially the Sub-Saharan countries. For example, "in terms of global reserves, over 90 percent of the platinum group of minerals (PGMs) are in South Africa and Zimbabwe (AFRODAD, 2017; Jourdan, 2012)." Similarly, "[o]ver 50% of the world's diamonds reserves are found in Angola, Botswana, DRC, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe (AFRODAD, 2017)." The most profound colonial legacy in many African states is resource dependent economies as decolonization brought more political freedom and little to no economic independence (Amavilah, 2011). The desire to industrialise, create more jobs, stimulate economic growth, and to increase income levels and ultimately improve the standards of living aspired to by African countries failed to materialize as the resource dependency economic route was cursed with Dutch disease (where discovery of a new resource, e.g., minerals or oil, harms a country's economy) (Di John, 2011). Thus, there is a negative correlation between mineral dependency and economic GDP growth rates in commodity-dependent countries (Jourdan, 2012). Superimposed on these curses are the problems of corruption, lack of good governance, rule of law, illicit flows from resource extraction all of which have made African countries fail to maximise benefits from resource extraction (Lemaître, 2019; Mutio, 2021; and Igbatayo, 2019).

Many African countries export their raw minerals abroad for processing and refining due to lack of processing and refining plant facilities. For example, the DRC supplies more than 60 per cent of the world's cobalt, which is processed in China before it is exported to North America and the European Union (EU) (Lockhart, 2021; Katulondi and Peterson 2021). Zimbabwe is unable to fully benefit from its platinum group metals resources as concentrate is exported for final processing (Dzinomwa and Katiyo, 2014; Mamina, Maganga, and Dzwiti, 2020). It equally has no meaningful diamond beneficiation industry. Some countries with oil and gas resources have no, or limited, local refinery capacity. These countries could potentially benefit from adapting the charter cities concept to grow cities around these resources. Adapting the model to guard against 'ghost cities' legacies, and ensuring the development of secondary and up-stream industries around the resource concerned (Hinton, 2019).

To illustrate further, a charter city in the DRC can facilitate industrial diversification through implementation of an industrial policy that support strong downstream linkages (mineral beneficiation) in the mining industry by investing in a cobalt refining and processing plant. This will promote the establishment of a strong domestic manufacturing base that failed to materialize due to DRC's over-dependency on natural resources (Katulondi and Peterson, 2021). Similarly, services industries, information technology, research and development institutions, manufacturing and other economic activities not inextricably linked to (dependent on) the resource can be nurtured while the resource deposits last to promote post-extraction sustainability.

An effective industrial policy strategy is important for facilitating economic diversification process in Africa. Industrial policy or industrial strategy is aimed at specific industries to promote economic productivity and efficiency. As Lockhart (2021), correctly points out, industrial strategy "involves actively shaping industrial clusters through attracting context-relevant industries, honing industry-relevant talent, grooming ecosystem-supporting industries, and adopting business-friendly policies". It should be noted, however, that the establishment of strong institutions and sound infrastructure is key to a successful industrial policy and it should suit the context and capabilities of the country to ensure growth in domestic industries. The economic success of the 'East Asian Tigers' (Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore) is credited to the effective implementation of an industrial policy in optimizing land, labour and capital to promote industrialization (Lockhart, 2021). In all this the rule of law and good governance are critical for any modified charter city model to have competitive advantage over other models.

The surge in global demand for critical metals like cobalt, lithium, and tungsten as inputs in high tech-energy, renewable energy, electric vehicle industries in the EU and North America is an opportunity for African countries to expand production activities through value addition on mineral commodities and diversify their industries (Katulondi and Peterson, 2021). Also, the sustained growth of China's construction and vehicle industry means a higher demand of platinum, steel, and iron ore imports from Africa (Ford, 2021). However, the social, economic, and environmental impacts should be paramount as a sustainable extractive industry remains key to Africa's development. Charter cities can adopt and implement industrial strategy that maximise mineral beneficiation objectives through linkages development in mining industry. These linkages include, backward/upstream, horizontal/side-stream and forward/downstream linkages and are critical for the development of other sectors and establishing cross-sector linkages that promote productive capacities and support economic diversification for long-term economic growth (Jourdan, 2012). Unlike SEZs that rely on relaxed regulatory incentives– some of which may not be compatible with climate change action and maximining tax revenue from resources – charter cities depend more on the integrity and strength of the regulatory environment created as opposed to concessionary incentives (Lutter, et al., 2021).

Additionally, the adoption and implementation of an industrial policy strategy creates space for charter cities to experiment with policies at a local level to support local firms and industries, test different ideas for optimal outcome and promote governance innovation to improve state capacity (Lutter, et al., 2021). For example, charter cities can implement an industrial strategy that allows industries and firms to merge and gain economies of scale that promote regional value chains through industrial clustering. For example, platinum mines in Zimbabwe and South Africa can collaborate and invest in a processing plant where the platinum can be processed and refined and even fabrication undertaken in the region instead of being exported.

Charter cities can also facilitate industrial diversification process in Africa to promote economic growth through industrial policy designed at selecting labour-intensive industries that has potential to create backward and forward linkages and diversify industries. For example, Ethiopia is targeting labour-intensive manufacturing industries which are textiles and apparel manufacturing in Hawassa Industrial Park and pharmaceutical manufacturing in Kilinto Park. These manufacturing industries are critical in complimenting the country's agro-processing industries and to diversify its economy (Lockhart, 2021). Also, to diversify African economies, charter cities could adopt and implement an industrial strategy that select critical industries and service sectors (like information technology (IT) or infrastructure) that can complement and expand industrial production capacity and boost economic growth. Thus, industrial strategy should be geared toward bridging the gap between industries and the service sector to successfully achieve diversification.

Charter cities have potential to diversify the economy and move it up the value chain by promoting regional value chains that support local and regional industries to grow before they compete in international markets. This can be achieved through investing in infrastructure (like sea ports, airports and railway), reduce transaction costs and barriers to entry to establish industrial clusters, improving supply of skilled labour (by building training colleges and universities), technology adoption to improve productivity of industries and attracting foreign investors to invest (in processing and refining industries, for example. Foreign investments are critical for revenue generation, employment creation, technology transfer and knowledge-skills spillover that will ultimately lead to long-run economic growth in the continent (Lockhart, 2021).

However, the original charter cities model puts too much faith in foreign investments in financing the city's industrial projects. Such foreign investments can come with some stringent conditions that could restrict or constrain the ability of the city to achieve local development, thereby supporting the neo-colonialism arguments. The national and local government should have a bigger role to play in resource mobilisation to promote the local foundations of the charter city. These challenges require a strong government and effective institutions to address the challenges and provide an enabling business environment (Mehlum, Moene, and Torvik, 2006; Ologunla, Kareem, and Raheem, 2014).

Charter cities have autonomy to implement comprehensive industrial policies could improve the overall business environment and facilitate industrial clusters to diversify the economy for optimal growth. The structure and weakening industrial base in Africa call for a comprehensive industrial policy that go beyond growth pursuit to policy interventions that bring structural transformation in promising sectors to diversify production activities, create employment and achieve a broad-based socio-economic development.

5. Regional integration and potential role for charter cities

As the continent recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, charter cities can be useful avenues to attract FDI and deepen regional integration and support national development objectives that strengthen local content by producing commodities needed locally and within the continent and reduce over-reliance in global imports (Chivunga and Tempest, 2021). This calls for African states to reform their policies through engaging in more free trade and regional trade agreements such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement and Trans-Pacific Partnership (AfCFTA), Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and the Tripartite Free Trade Agreements involving the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). These free trade agreements promote digital infrastructure for deeper regional integration and free trade and minimize global shocks (Lutter, et al., 2021).

The AfCFTA aims to strengthen regional integration in Africa through trade reforms that facilitate value upgrading, reliable and cost-effective digital infrastructure, access to quality e-commerce services and consistent regulatory frameworks that ensure cooperation and boost trade markets (Chivunga and Tempest, 2021). With massive tariff reductions, the full implementation of AfCFTA will promote growth and economic diversification across the continent (Gondwe, 2020). Thus, trading agreements are significant building blocks towards governance reform, infrastructure and technology deployment that drive long-term sustainable economic growth. These would be necessary if a version of charter cities is used to leverage natural resource extraction.

Trade agreements like the AfCFTA encourage the flow of FDIs in charter cities as they (charter cities) are bound by treaties signed by host countries which provide a sense of security to investors as some of the trade agreements can be enforced in international courts (Mason and Lutter, 2020). An increase in FDI inflows in charter cities will advance technology, digital tools, infrastructure development and e-commerce services that substantially improve information flows, encourages competitiveness and productivity in Africa. Such services and innovation could form part of the post-extraction economies in resource-centred charter cities. Charter cities can also attract public and private investors to invest in innovative technologies for renewable energy that can drive industrial diversification and facilitate a competitive environment for domestic linkages and regional value chains in African centred resource beneficiation (AFRODAD, 2020; Chivunga and Tempest, 2021). The establishment of innovative technology and machinery in domestic industries will allow firms to be efficient, flexible and adapt to production changes.

The last major point we would like to make is that charter cities can also promote sustainable resource extraction and transition to renewable energy by implementing regulatory frameworks and policies compatible with the SDGs, climate change aspirations, and African Mining Vision (AMV) (Fuller and Kahn, 2013); UNEP, 2020). The 'African Mining Vision' (AMV) adopted in 2009 by African Heads of States, asserts the strategic mineral development and broad-based growth facilitated by the creation of economic linkages. The AMV provides a framework for integrating mining into development plans across Africa through the integration of mineral policy into development policy not only at local levels but also at national and regional levels (UNEP 2020). Tackling climate change and renewable energy transition require more coherent and regionally coordinated policy response, hence regional policy frameworks such as the AMV, AfCFTA and SADC industrialization policy are significant in strengthening regional integration and driving sustainable economic growth in Africa. There is a potential role for the charter cities approach to implement these continental and regional development frameworks as discussed above.

6. Conclusion

Accelerating economic growth and poverty reduction have been at the forefront of the economic agenda of Africa. Political and socio-economic challenges mean that economic growth and development continue to lag in most African countries. This exploratory paper examined how charter cities can be adapted to leverage Africa's natural resources to accelerate economic growth in the continent consistent with continental frameworks. This followed an analysis on the potential of charter cities to create economic linkages that drive industrialisation around resource rich areas.

However, the success of the charter cities approach depends on the ability of national governments to establish good governance, rule of law, effective institutions that promote both a conducive environment for business and structural transformation, while promoting environmental sustainability. While charter cities are premised on increased administrative and regulatory autonomy, unlike SEZs, national government remain central to resource mobilisation and community empowerment. FDI and sponsoring investors should be subject to the social, economic, and cultural context of the host government that shape the transformational policies and institutions needed to create strong domestic industries, regional value chains to achieve inclusive growth.

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