"If Not Today, When?": Kenya Airways Makes the Case for African Unity

George Kamal,
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AFRAA runs several Projects. We have the Joint Fuel Program. We have the Roots Network Coordination and Cargo. We have safety, technical and operations, training, distribution, aero political and advocacy. sustainability market intelligence and various industry forums and events which of these initiatives has delivered the most tangible value to your airline and why that specifically

Okay, let me start with the joint fuel program. The joint fuel program has delivered the greatest value fuel represents between 30 to 40 percent of the African airline operating cost. Any improvement even one percent in fuel costs has a direct impact on profitability combined with AFRAA's market intelligence and procurement initiative, members gain stronger negotiating power and better visibility of fuel market trend because the economy of scale. So, this is more or less the biggest impact but definitely we cannot deny the training part which is which is working pretty well with AFRAA and also the MRO and we've seen that with the first MRO conference which took place in Addis Ababa recently and we're looking for the second one to come next year. I do believe you have to belong somewhere to have this economy of scale and a support from all those airlines. So imagine you have about 49 or 50 members they are all standing together that's an economy of scale when we procure something altogether and it's not limited to those elements only it's actually much bigger and now we're looking at even looking at the blocked funds looking at some more some more avenues to support the airlines and I do like to take this opportunity to thank the AFRAA Secretariat and management that they worked very hard to achieve those achievements we have with the fuel and other areas as well.

Free Route Airspace has moved from a concept, to a WACAF trial, to full deployment and now Eastern and Southern Africa is next. In plain terms, what does flying a User Preferred Route actually change for your pilots and your bottom line?

For pilots, it means flying the most efficient route rather than following a fixed air corridor. For the airlines, every minute saved reduces fuel burn, emissions and operating costs. Saving just five minutes on a flight across hundreds of flights and hundreds of sectors, each month creates a significant annual saving. So it's not only for the pilot, it's also for the environment. So when you look at the environment, it really has a huge impact. And did Kenya Airways also see a benefit beyond the pilots and beyond all this? Kenya Airways have seen a huge benefit out of that. Kenya Airways participated in the pilot program and we have already seen measurable improvements in route efficiency and fuel consumption. Even, as I said, a 1% reduction in fuel Burn delivers substantial financial savings while supporting our sustainability commitment.

What can African airlines do collectively to improve the intra-African connectivity?

Currently, African Airlines are working in silos. Everyone works on his own. We need to cooperate more than compete. And Africa has over 1.4 billion people. Yet, intra-African connectivity remains among the lowest globally through codesharing, schedule coordination, interline agreement. And we try to push for a full-time implementation. We can connect many more African cities directly. That's why we're looking now in Africa to expand our wings, to go beyond the association to the Pan-African Alliance where we collectively stand together commercially from a network and from a commercial perspective and from operational perspective and technical as well. We don't have a consolidated MRO team like a pool. We don't have a pool for maintenance. We don't have a network which looked at together. So we need to do all this. and we need to be a unity in Africa to make sure that we gain the momentum and gain the revenues required.

You came into this role from operations flight ops, safety, network execution. How has that background shaped the first few months of decisions you've had to make as acting CEO?

I came from operations, I can see what is happening in the kitchen, behind the scene. So when you come and take a decision, you take a decision based on data and informed data, you're not taking a decision haphazard, you're not moving into a direction which is you don't know where you're going so my operation background taught me that safety and execution comes first. Since taking over, we have focused on operational discipline improving on-time performance it went from an old 2023 of 46% up to 89% at some stage while strengthening reliability, financial performance and customer experience. Good strategy only creates value when it is consistently executed.

Across Africa we continue to face high operating costs, infrastructure challenges and fragmented markets. Which issue do you believe requires the greatest collective action from airlines and governments and why?

First of all, let's look at the governments. Governments needs to look at airline instead of tax milking. We need to look at it as aviation infrastructure. Airlines contributes directly into the GDP. We know some airlines contribute up to 23 to 26% of the GDP. However, other airlines contribute, we contribute about 3.2 to 3.5% of the Kenyan GDP. So that is a big impact on the country. That's why you need to look at it as aviation infrastructure. From an airline perspective, airlines need to work together, even if the countries are not tied together airlines needs to put hand in hand because that's the only way. Let's think about it this way, an airline with 30 aircrafts you need to go to 150 destinations, how can you do that you're not going to buy aircrafts every day but you can do an interline you can do a code-share you can do an agreement with other airlines that means you expand the scope. We've done this with a lot of airlines we have it with KLM and Air France we have it with Emirates, we have it with Qatar, and all those inputs gives my passenger, my customer, the possibility to fly to more destinations, to fly more routes, and I don't have to have 150 routes, but other airlines have. If we add it together, we will do a very good network together.

The JKIA's modernization project valued at 154.2 billion Kenya Shillings has recently been signed. As the airport's home carrier, what are the stakes for Kenya Airways and the future plans of the airline?

Okay, definitely, this is a transformation investment into JKIA. The future plan for the airline is to grow and the growth we're looking at 60 aircrafts within the next within 2030 and within the next 10 years, we're looking to go into 100 aircrafts in total these 100 aircrafts or 60 aircrafts coming up they need a place, they need a parking spot and that is what JKIA is providing to us in the medium and long-term investment they are putting in the airport. And this will put this airport in somewhere very important in the map because it will increase the number of passengers up to 22 to 23 million passengers. Instead of you are today looking at 9 million, then you will go even more than double. It means for Kenya Airways, it's strengthened the position of Kenya Airways and Kenya Airways is an enabler to support that growth so it is it is both ways it grows Kenya Airways and it ensures that Kenya Airways when it's growing as well it it's tied together as well grows the number of passengers comes into the country we actually contribute about 60 percent 60 to 65 percent of the total number of passengers arriving into JKIA.

Kenya Airways is, since recently, holding the chair of AFRAA's Executive Committee. What does continuity mean for how AFRAA's broader agenda gets carried forward?

Okay, continuity means maintaining momentum. We have built strong progress on connectivity, sustainability, advocacy, collaboration. As a chairman, my priority is to convert strategy into measurable outcomes that benefits every member of the AFRAA and every airline.

If AFRAA didn't exist, what's the one thing your airline would struggle to do on its own?

I will tell you, I'll take the first thing I told you about that it made a lot of savings to us, is the fuel. You know, the fuel constitutes about 40% of my cost. And today, with AFRAA procuring this fuel as an economy of scale, it actually reduces my cost. I will be struggling to work on that angle on my own. Every airline will be fragmented to run. We are more than, I think, 15 or 16 airlines. All of us are benefiting out of it and we want more to come and benefit out of this. It's a pool and we want more to come and benefit out of this procurement.

Where do you think AFRAA needs to be bolder for its members?

AFRAA needs to stand up. And when we see some of the current situations like taxes, like imposing new restrictions, we need to be bolder and we need to stand up and try our best to support our members, to open up the borders, to support SAATM, and to support the members in achieving their goals, reducing the overflying within Africa, at least within the African continent, for African Airlines. And that's one of the things which we need to work on, and we are actually working on through the alliance we are trying to put in place.

Which new initiatives do you think AFRAA should undertake? Why?

The one I just mentioned is the biggest one because it has an umbrella under AFRAA, which has underneath a lot of initiatives, which is number one, is an alliance. Number one, we need to be together. Once we are together, then we start moving into the right direction, which is we get the alliance in place and we start moving. We do the committees and then we start moving with that into the right direction. which is the collaboration commercially, and it will benefit everybody. It will benefit even the other global alliance. And this is not a global, It's actually an alliance within Africa only.

Ten years from now, what do you want people to say your airline did for African aviation?

What my airline have did for African aviation? Number one, I want the people to say that Kenya Airways have connected people, have ensured to connect markets between at least East Africa and the Sub-Sahara and South Africa. And now we expand also to the North that we connect those markets together, not only as my airline, but I'm speaking about all the airlines in Africa when they are putting hand to hand. Because this moment and today, if we don't do it, who will do it? Nobody else, And if it's not today, when is it going to be? In 10 years? Let's do it today. Let's work together today to achieve that in 10 years people will speak about us and say, 10 years ago we were fragmented. Now we are one unit. Europe is able to be a unity. Why can't we?

What's one thing you wish the flying public understood about what it takes to keep an African airline in the air?

The one thing I want them to understand is if they look at IATA today and look at the revenue per seat in Africa. And please take a look there, you will see the revenue per seat in 2026 is $1.3. Not the revenue, the net profit is $1.3. If it is $1.3, that means there is a huge cost behind us. And this cost comes into the cross-border cost, over-flying cost, taxes, all of those are costs.
Fuel, labor, manpower, all of those are costs. All what I want the public to understand that, yes, we have the tickets are expensive in Africa, more expensive than anywhere else. But this is because our costs are very high. But if you look at the IATA data, the net profit per seat is $1.3. That's what I get per seat. And where do we get our money?

We get it from ancillaries, we get it from cargo, we get it from diversifying the business. And this is what I want the people to understand. That airline is not made only to make money. It's to make money, yes, not to lose money. And at the same time, in parallel, the airline is there as a gateway. And we've seen that in the Gulf War. When the Gulf War happened and all the airlines in the Gulf have ceased the operations, if you don't have a national carrier to support your people, your people will be stranded. Kenya Airways have listened to the voices of the Kenyans and we went with the first two flights to evacuate everybody immediately from Dubai. And we've done that. And we've done it before, during COVID and during a lot of other times. And that's the reason for the presence of National Carrier. It's your gateway.

If you could send one message to every other AFRAA member airline CEO today, what would it be?

I would say thank you for supporting AFRAA. Thank you for believing in the African Aviation and in AFRAA. And I would say let's keep working together. Let's put hands together. Let's work on a commercial plan, an operational plan, and a technical plan. Let's work together, not in silos, but work together as one unit. And if we do that, we will all win. We will all be winning at the end. Thank you.

Kenya Airways : « Cessons de travailler en silos »

Pour George Kamal, Directeur général par intérim de Kenya Airways et Président du Comité exécutif de l'AFRAA, le programme conjoint d'achat de carburant est l'initiative la plus décisive : le carburant pèse 30 à 40 % des coûts d'exploitation, et l'effet d'échelle de près de 50 compagnies membres renforce leur pouvoir de négociation. À cela s'ajoutent la formation et la maintenance (MRO), qu'il souhaite mutualiser dans un véritable pool africain.

Son diagnostic est clair : avec plus de 1,4 milliard d'habitants, l'Afrique affiche l'une des plus faibles connectivités intra-continentales au monde. La réponse passe par le partage de codes, la coordination des horaires, les accords interlignes et, surtout, la mise en place d'une Alliance panafricaine — commerciale, opérationnelle et technique. « L'Europe a su faire son unité. Pourquoi pas nous ? »

Issu des opérations, il revendique une gestion fondée sur la donnée : la ponctualité de Kenya Airways est passée de 46 % (2023) à 89 %. Il attend des gouvernements qu'ils cessent de voir les compagnies comme une source de taxes pour les considérer comme une infrastructure aérienne — Kenya Airways contribuant à hauteur de 3,2 à 3,5 % du PIB kényan. La modernisation de JKIA (154,2 milliards de shillings) doit accompagner sa croissance vers 60 avions d'ici 2030 et 100 à terme.

Enfin, il rappelle la fragilité économique du secteur — un bénéfice net de seulement 1,3 dollar par siège — et le rôle vital du transporteur national, « votre porte d'entrée », qui a évacué ses ressortissants lors de la guerre du Golfe comme pendant la COVID. Son message aux dirigeants africains : « Travaillons ensemble, pas en silos. Si nous le faisons, nous gagnerons tous. »