

Kenya finds a lake of liquid gold



A Somali refugee child drinks water from a bottle cap in the registration area of the IFO refugee camp which makes up part of the giant Dadaab refugee settlement on July 23, 2011 in Dadaab, Kenya.

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Marketplace for Thursday, September 12, 2013

In one of Kenya's least-developed and poorest regions, untapped underground aquifers have been detected by special satellite-based radar. They hold trillions of gallons of water -- and tremendous promise for a region where conflicts over water are commonplace.

Turkana County is in arid northwest Kenya. Water there is so important that when oil operators tried to establish goodwill among local residents by drilling water wells, they were actually turned down in some instances "because having a well is seen as being more likely to be attacked," says Clare Allenson, an East Africa analyst at the Eurasia Group.

Allenson says fights over water between Kenyan herders and farmers are longstanding. "It's probably the single biggest driver of insecurity and political instability in Turkana," she says.

Four out of every 10 Kenyans lack access to safe drinking water. So having a deluge of water for everyone should solve the problem right? Hopefully, but it's not without risks.

“Just because resources are discovered does not mean they’re going to be distributed in either efficient ways or ways that benefit citizens,” says Charles Warren of Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. “Kenya itself has had a history of ethnic issues, a history of politicized ethnicity.”

That could complicate both sharing of water and the infrastructure needed to get it out of the ground.

Nationally, investment and infrastructure have benefited urban centers at the expense of rural regions like Turkana, which feel ignored by the central government. Kenya’s new constitution gives counties more control over resources, but local leaders may not be ready to deal with such an asset.

“All of those institutions at the county level are nascent at best or haven’t even been set in motion,” says Allenson at the Eurasia Group. “In terms of having a skill set, the knowledge base to manage it -- it’s not quite present at the county level.”

Surveying the social landscape is as critical as the geological one, says Jon Naugle, a water expert with Relief International.

“If you just go in and start boring haphazardly, putting in pumps, then you’re apt to end in conflict,” he says. “It’s too late after you’ve put the well in the wrong place in someone’s field, and that person claims ownership.”

The discovery was the result of a UNESCO groundwater mapping project, done in association with the Kenyan government and financed by the Japanese government. The aquifers hold a minimum of 66 trillions of gallons of water, according to Radar Technologies International, the firm which helped make the discovery.

Whether Kenya can create an equitable path from underground to homes and farms will be the difference between the potential of all that water flowing through -- or evaporating.