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With oilfind and water, Turkana can soar and lead by example

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This week's announcement that a huge underground fresh water source has been discovered in Turkana is set to be a game changer not only in the county but also in the whole country. Researchers say the aquifer, covering a surface area of 4,164 square kilometres at Lokipiti, hold about 200 billion cubic meters of fresh water and can meet Kenya's water needs for 70 years.

The latest finding, according to the government study, can heighten the country's share of accessible water by 8.5 per cent and is likely to double the amount of water available for consumption today — ultimately improving the lives of Kenyans living in water scarce areas.

The onus now is on the government to embrace this system, fund the drilling, build and maintain the infrastructure and change millions of lives for the better. Undoubtedly, this newly found wealth of water opens a door to a more prosperous future for the people of Turkana and the nation at large.

To better appreciate the significance of the new water source, it is important to realise that the people living in Turkana, like others living in similar conditions in the developing countries, are suffering from health problems caused by water and sanitation deficits.

Unlike the earlier discoveries of oil which are expected to take years before their benefits trickle down to the Turkana people, the Director of Water Resources in the Ministry of Environment, Water and Natural Resources John Nyaoro revealed that the locals will enjoy the newly discovered resource in two months time.

Equally significant, the water discoveries are poised to change Turkana, and its immediate neighbours from basket cases often in need of food aid during droughts into the country's food basket. There is reason to believe that the virgin nature of the soils in these formerly arid areas will give farmers the comparative advantage to produce food not only to feed the rest of the country but also to export to the regional and continental markets.

The multi-billion shilling irrigation project planned at the Galana Agricultural Development Corporation in Kilifi and Tana River counties will mark yet another major development that will add a feather to Kenya's cap and herald its emergence as the bread basket for Africa. The project is planned to cover over 1 million acres.

Agriculture Cabinet Secretary Felix Koskei said the project is set to kick-off in November.

He revealed that Kenya Agricultural Research Institute is carrying out studies on the local soils and the results are expected soon.

It is noteworthy that Kari has been in the forefront of carrying research on ways to improve productivity in agriculture. Already, the institute has come up with a maize variety that increases yields from 20 bags to 68 bags per acre.

The new variety is set to revolutionise farm incomes because it will, in addition, mature faster and is immune to the common maize diseases.

One of the greatest challenges facing the government will be ensuring that the spectacular advances being made at Kari and other research institutions are quickly translated into results that are made available to the farmers on the ground.

The current situation whereby research findings are only shared among fellow researchers while the farmers are left to make do with seeds that are three or four generations old should not be tolerated.

There is no reason, for example, why farmers in Zambia are availed maize seeds that yield between 50 and 60 bags an acre while Kenyan farmers — with superior research facilities and world-class researchers — are still grappling with a variety whose yields are between 15 and 20 bags. This is — and should be, unacceptable.