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OPINION AND ANALYSIS

Let us use Turkana water to transform Kenya

The northern part of Kenya has suffered neglect and lack of investment for a long time. It has since Independence been treated as badlands no one was really interested in. Little wonder then the governor of Turkana, Josephat Nanok, says he can hardly get competent people to run his government.

But by the look of things, this seems likely to change for a number reasons. The first one is that the Turkana are turning to irrigated farming and supplying markets with a lot of produce.

Traditionally, the Turkana have been a pastoralists community, which has suffered poverty due to cattle rustling and the effect of their culture on education.

Second, there has been a large oil find in the area which is expected to change the fortunes of the Turkana and possibly that of Kenya. Thirdly, there is a large water find in the area which could have another transformational effect.

According to researchers, the area sits on a 200 billion cubic metres of fresh water that could serve the country for 70 years. Better still, the aquifer is self-replenishing.

The government needs to plan well for all these resources in particular the water. We propose that the water be used for irrigation in the area and the wider northern Kenya. That way, it can enhance Kenya's food security and uplift the welfare of the residents—in a non-disruptive way, unlike oil.

The government should support the water exploitation with infrastructure, specifically the Lapsset corridor that is likely to open a new development frontier in Kenya away from the traditional northern corridor.

However, we urge the government to carry out more sustainability studies before using the water. Although it is reported to be self-replenishing, we need to ascertain that this is indeed the case. The water find should not derail our effort to conserve our environment and protect our water bodies.

Harvesting rain water remains the most sustainable and guaranteed source of water. Actually, the best use for the subterranean water source would be as a fallback option.

Countries like Botswana have implemented the harvesting policy very well and suffer less during droughts than green countries like Kenya. But the water harvesting business should not be left to government alone.

It is time a policy was formulated to have every building provide for how it will harvest the resource before licensing by the counties. Unless we enforce this, Kenya will not be an environmentally sustainable country to live in. Let us keep our eyes on the ball even with the new water source.

Back to Business Daily: Let us use Turkana water to transform Kenya <URL: javascript:history.go(-1)>