

New trust fund could help sisal shoot to the top of Tanzania's exports, again

By MOHAMMED ISSA

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Tanzania has established a new fund trust for sisal — at last! This is the culmination of an idea mooted in 1996 but which has been gathering dust on the shelves ever since.

Sisal was until recently the country's major foreign currency earner, but its production has been falling due to nationalisation of estates and the advent of synthetic fibres in the world market. The fund will step up production of the crop and assist growers get quality seeds, fertilisers and farm implements.

Dr David Mathayo, Deputy Minister for Agriculture, Food Security and Cooperatives, said establishment of the fund was at an advanced stage. "Its member-composition, objectives and up-keeping will be on the lines of an enacted statute: the Sisal Industry Act of 1996," he said. The law confers statutory powers to the crop's governing body, the Tanzania Sisal Board (TBS), to officiate the formation of the fund. According to the regulations, the board shall establish a Sisal Industry Development Trust Fund into which all money collected through levies will be deposited.

TBS will be represented in the fund by its director general while the Sisal Association of Tanzania and the Commissioner for Research and Training will each have three representatives. The law allows use of the fund to pay for experiments, investigation and research related to the sisal industry. Also, the fund may be used for promotional activities, development, sales and marketing of the cash crop, among other uses.

An Agricultural Development Bank will soon be established for sisal growers and other farmers to access loans and other incentives. The country's budget for this financial year (2009/2010) has been hailed as the first agriculture one. It vows to allocate more resources — such as agro-inputs and farm gears. Some \$513 million (Tsh666.9 billion) has been allocated to agriculture, a 30 per cent increase from \$395 million (Tsh513 billion) the previous year.

In the 1960s, the country produced large amounts of sisal and was the world's leading producer — at 24 per cent of the total. But from 1970, the production started to decline. However, sisal is still an important crop in the country. Limited market prospects and unfavourable world prices, inadequate research development

and poor marketing arrangements are among the factors responsible for the decline in production. Moreover, research on soils and land suitability shows that continued sisal cultivation depletes the soil nutrient reserves, leading to dismal production. Alternative land uses in Tanzania are being suggested.

Sisal is an endemic tropical crop whose leaves provide the most important hard natural fibre used in the production of twines, ropes, sacks and carpets. Alternative applications of sisal leaf in the country has so far extended to probable use of sisal waste (obtained after squeezing out the “juice” to make paper), for electricity generation. This was attested to recently by a pilot project titled “Cleaner integral utilisation of sisal waste for biogas and biofertilisers”, which showed that biogas from sisal residue can produce high-voltage electricity.

A biogas plant at Hale Sisal Estate in Korogwe district, Tanga, has been able to yield 150 kilowatts of electricity, which is enough to power a nearby pulp-making mill. The findings could help check the power divide existing between rural and urban communities, and could extend to other locally available renewable sources.

More than half of the world population has no access to electricity. And with the rising prices of fuel, the search for alternative energy is crucial. Until recently, only two per cent of the sisal plant (the fibre and the juice extract) was considered to be useful. The Hale project is part of efforts to find alternative applications of sisal to counter the current slump in fibre sales. Sisal biogas utilisation adds value to sisal waste, solves environment problems related to disposal of the waste, generates energy for use in the sisal industry, produces a valuable biological fertiliser, and reduces greenhouse gas emissions. The project cost was estimated at \$1 million, with the money coming from the Common Fund for Commodities, UNIDO, the government and Katani company.

Annual global production of sisal and henequen in 1970 was about 800,000 tonnes. Kenya and Tanzania accounted for over 30 per cent of this. In 2006, global production was estimated at about 268,000 tonnes, of which only 22 per cent was from Kenya and Tanzania. The down trend in sisal production has been attributed to poor marketing, barriers to free trade, non utilisation of the sisal plant and inadequate research and development.

Other sisal growing nations are China, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and Mozambique.

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