

Kenya to boost production of rice after a spike in demand

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Rice production in Mwea in Kenya's Kirinyaga County has endured for decades, banking on the waters of the upper Tana catchment. And as is tradition, every December farmers are busy harvesting rice at the Mwea Irrigation Scheme (MIS), the source of 84 percent of all rice produced in Kenya.

It has been this way since 1950 when the colonial government first established the scheme using cheap Mau Mau labour.

Yet there is a problem. The 30,000 acre scheme (with a gazetted irrigation area of 25,000 acres) – and other irrigation schemes across the country, including Bura, Ahero, and in Budalang'i – cannot meet the Kenyan demand for rice. The balance has to be imported, mostly from Pakistan.

According to Dr Mary Mutembei, the head of the Rice Promotion Programme at Kenya's Ministry of Agriculture, rice consumption in the country has nearly doubled to 23kgs per person per year from 12kgs per person per year in 2008.

"We're importing heavily to plug this deficit. Kenya spends about Ksh25 billion (\$200 million) per year on rice importation. Yet we've got a very big and unexploited potential towards self-sufficiency," she told *The EastAfrican* last week.

On average Kenyans consume 720,000 metric tonnes of rice annually against a production capacity of less than 100,000 metric tonnes. It is estimated that this year Kenya will import 640,000 metric tonnes of rice to meet demand.

Under the national rice development strategy (2019-



2030), Kenya hopes to increase the area under rice to meet at least 80 percent of local demand by expanding the scheme at Mwea.

The government has already allowed an additional irrigation area of 10,000 acres on trial basis, outside of the gazetted area of the scheme.

According to the Global Agriculture Information Network (Gain), a bulletin of the US Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), Kenya's rice production is set to increase to 90,000 metric tonnes in 2022/23 from 80,000 metric tonnes in the previous period as a result of the ongoing expansion that will tap water from Thiba Dam, currently under construction and with a capacity of 15.6million cubic metres of water when complete.

Water shortage

Historically, Mwea has obtained irrigation water from two rivers – Thiba and Nyamindi – using intakes set up in 1992. That was sufficient for the initial 5,000 acres but with expansion came water shortages during the main growing season and blast attack during the long rains season, factors that lead to reduced rice yields in both seasons.

A farmer prepares a rice field at Wang'uru in Kirinyaga County for the planting season in July. Picture File

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Dr Mary Mutembei, head of the Rice Promotion Programme, Ministry of Agriculture



Now thanks to the new dam, the cropping area under irrigation will rise to 35,000 acres per season, a tenth of the size of Kirinyaga County. Downstream, a raft of infrastructural enhancements – including roads from farms, supplemental link canals and rehabilitation of irrigation facilities – promise to improve the irrigation system.

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has pumped in some Ksh4.2 billion (\$34 million) into half of the extension in Mutithi.

Collective effort

According to Mwea Irrigation Scheme Manager Innocent Ateka, these developments will raise production to satisfy the large population of Kenyans now consuming more rice than the traditional staple maize meal, whose consumption in the country has grown marginally over the decade, leading to a scenario where rice could easily become the most consumed grain in the country in the near future.

Officials admit it will take more than water, however, to meet local rice demand. There is need for collective effort to improve the quality of seed, correct farming practices, increased mechanisation in the production chain

and improvement of soils.

An earlier study by JICA had suggested the need to adjust cropping seasons.

"Now it is the rainy season, yet the farmers are just harvesting... Rice doesn't require the water when it is harvest time. This is just one of the contradictions the scheme needs to fix to enhance production," noted Hayashi Kenji, senior representative at JICA Kenya Office.

"Farmers used to think that rice is supposed to be flooded with water throughout. But we're changing that perception with training," Dr Wilson Oyange, the manager for Capacity Development Project for Enhancement of Rice Production (CaDPERP) at Kenya's Ministry of Agriculture, told *The EastAfrican*.

"The idea is to save on water in the upper parts and have it flow farther to the lower parts of the scheme so that we can be able to increase production downstream."

The scheme has also completely mechanised paddy harvesting, which is said to have salvaged three bags per acre of produce that was previously lost in post-harvest losses while harvesting time has been reduced from 14 man-days per acre to 45 mins for one combined harvester.