



Africa's big plans for biofuel

By Clare Byrne

Visitors to the poor south-east African country of Mozambique are often taken aback at the cost of getting around.

"Is petrol is problem," taxi drivers in the capital Maputo retort when challenged about fares that begin at 100 meticaïs (about R30) for a journey of no more than a couple of blocks.

Spiralling oil prices, which have resulted in a more than three-fold jump in fuel prices in Mozambique this year, is one factor fuelling the scramble among African countries with no reserves of "black gold" to corner the market for greener alternatives.

Not to be outdone African powerhouse South Africa is also preparing

From Mali to Madagascar, Senegal to South Africa, biofuels is the buzzword as African countries wake up to the possibility of using their vast spaces to grow crops that reduce their fossil fuel bill.

Biofuels also carry the promise of much sought after foreign exchange as industrialised countries look to bio-ethanol and bio-diesel to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions from transport.

The European Union has decreed that 10 per cent of motor fuel used within its 27 member states must be biofuel by 2020.

But European farmers have been slow to convert their operations from food to fuel crops leading EU officials to estimate they will have to import at least one-fifth of their biofuel needs.

The world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, the United States, has also announced plans to reduce its carbon footprint by increasing the use of renewable and alternative fuels nearly five-fold over the next 10 years.

'We have enough land for enough food'

These commitments are music to the ears of poor African countries that account for only a tiny proportion of global greenhouse gas emissions but are expected to be hardest hit by climate change, through increased flooding and drought.

A biofuel superpower in the making is how the vast former Portuguese colony of Mozambique is being talked up, where millions of hectares of unused land have been identified as suitable for the production of fuel crops.

About \$700-million has already been committed to biofuel production in Mozambique, including 510 million dollars from British-based Central Africa Mining and Exploration Company to produce ethanol from sugarcane in southern Gaza province.

The state has also received requests to open up more than five million hectares of land for the production of bio-diesel, with coconuts, sunflowers and the weed-like jatropha plant being tested as possible feedstock.

While energy independence is the primary goal, the small size of Mozambique's economy means that domestic energy needs could be quickly met by biofuels, the energy ministry's new and renewable energy director, Antonio Saide, said in an interview.

"We can very quickly satisfy the domestic market and begin to export," said Saide.

Another African country with big plans for biofuels is Senegal, whose President Abdoulaye Wade has enthused about an African "biofuels revolution" and placed fuel crops at the heart of an agriculture renewal programme focusing on small farmers.

Not to be outdone African powerhouse South Africa is also preparing to plough money into biofuels, with construction already underway on one out of eight planned maize-to-ethanol refineries.

These Johnny-come-latelys in a biofuels industry dominated by Brazil have a number of aces up their sleeve.

Many are United Nations Least Developed Countries that enjoy tariff-free access to the EU for their goods under the Everything But Arms initiative.

The US African Growth and Opportunity Act also gives African countries preferential access to the US for a number of goods, that could be extended to include biofuels.

But growing fuel instead of food crops on a continent that is plagued by food insecurity has its critics.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in a study earlier this year warned that "liquid biofuel production could threaten the availability of adequate food supplies by diverting land and other resources away from food crops."

Mindful of that threat, drought-prone countries like Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia, Madagascar and Mali are championing jatropha as a non-edible bio-oil plant that grows in almost any soil.

"Life-changing," was the verdict of rock star turned anti-poverty campaigner Bob Geldof on a jatropha plantation employing hundreds of workers in southern Swaziland, although questions remain around the plant's yield in sub-optimal conditions and the toxicity of its seeds.

Oxfam has also warned against land in developing countries being gobbled up by sprawling biofuels plantations.

Mozambique's Saide rebuffed those concerns: "We have enough land for enough food." - Sapa-DPA

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