



*The Solar Panels in Wajir by Solargen that will enable farmers in the region harness solar energy to power their water pumps instead of using costly diesel-powered generators while the drip irrigation will ensure optimal use of water. Photo Credit: Solargen.*

## Solargen's plan to transform Kenya's north through climate-smart agriculture

By Badr Shariff

**N**ORTH Eastern is one of the regions hardest hit by perennial drought and famine in Kenya. The situation has been made worse by the effects of climate change as the region has not received adequate rainfall for the past five years. As a result, the livelihood of the nomadic communities in the area is now threatened, with many abandoning the villages to set up camp in urban centres. The continued rural-urban migration is expected to exacerbate food insecurity in the region unless concerted efforts are made to scale up food production through climate-smart agriculture.

It may not be known to many but the region has great potential for agriculture. Tana River, the longest river in Kenya, cuts right through the middle of Garissa town while Mandera has a seasonal river called Dawa. The areas along the banks of the two rivers are very fertile and can be used for irrigation farming. Though underutilised, the farmers along the two rivers produce some of the sweetest bananas and watermelons in Kenya.

They also grow tomatoes, mangoes, onions and lemons. Wajir on the other hand has a water table that is near the ground surface, making water easily available through the sinking of boreholes and shallow wells.

In spite of the potential, the farmers in the area are currently a frustrated lot, with many contemplating quitting farming. The biggest challenges they face are the high cost of farm inputs and exploitation by middle men who offer them low prices for their produce. The farmers lack the knowledge and the support to employ modern techniques of farming, resulting in crop failures and poor yields. Those who manage to get good harvests sell their produce to aggregators who dictate the prices. The farmers lack refrigeration facilities to preserve their produce to enable them fetch better prices in the market. When it rains elsewhere, especially in the slopes of Mt. Kenya, Tana bursts its banks and floods the entire area under cultivation. The farms become inaccessible and the produce is left to rot in the fields. The area is also infested with parasites that the farmers are unable to control. While the people of the North are not known for farming, these challenges have made farming even more unattractive.

It is against this backdrop that Solargen Technologies Limited, a leading energy, water and irrigation solutions provider, recently set up its regional headquarters in Wajir to offer farmers integrated solutions that comprises irrigation technologies, production planning, training, financing and market linkages. In the pilot phase, Solargen will design and install solar-powered drip irrigation systems for 40 farmers on Pay As You Go (PAYGO) financing model. The system will enable the farmers harness solar energy to power their water pumps instead of using costly diesel-powered generators while the drip irrigation will ensure optimal use of water.

The pilot phase is targeting farmers with over three acres of arable land and a source of water, either from the river or underground. The farmer selection process is currently ongoing.

Cognizant of the saying; you reap what you sow, the farmers will be supported right from the selection of seeds and fertilisers and in the analysis of soil type and water requirements. Solargen is investing in long-term relationships with reputable suppliers of seeds and fertilisers, allowing it to propose quality and affordable options to the farmers. During the course of the production, the farmers will have access to expert advice by agronomists and extension officers employed by Solargen. The farmers will also be trained on farming best practices to equip them with skills that will make them more resilient in facing their day-to-day challenges. We have set up a model farm adjacent to our Wajir office that will be used by the farmers for benchmarking.

To mitigate the post-harvest challenges of market access, Solargen plans to, in the short term, have agreements with off-takers of horticultural produce such as hotels, restaurants and exporters. However, plans are already underway to build refrigeration facilities in each of the counties to enable farmers preserve their produce and access lucrative local and international markets.

For this plan to bear fruit, Solargen will work with all stakeholders including government, developmental agencies, local leaders and communities. The transformation of northern Kenya into a leading horticultural producer will require the collective effort of every stakeholder. Solargen plans to do its part.

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