Drought-hit Kenyans find gold in tea trees - but for how long?

By Moraa Obiria

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At Sweet Waters, a village in central Kenya, Veronicah Nyambura stands under the hot sun between two fields. One is full of lush plants - but the other has crops so wilted that their leaves have curled up. The green land is planted with tea tree, an Australian native that thrives in this semi-arid part of Kenya. Opposite is a field of maize, which suffers in years of poor rains and high temperatures. "Maize is very disappointing. You plant but you're never sure whether you'll harvest anything," said Nyambura, who has planted a quarter-acre of tea trees.



John Tann via Wikimedia Commons

The 65-year-old said she harvests 900kg of tea tree branches every six months from that bit of land. When it was planted to maize, she got about 270 kg of grain every nine months, she said.

Many farmers in this part of Laikipia County - like farmers in many parts of the world - cannot afford to buy seeds for alternative crops better suited to drought, so keep planting maize. But Nyambura and about 800 other small-scale farmers were sold tea tree seedlings on credit by a company called Earthoil that also guaranteed to buy their harvest. Each seedling cost 3.5 Kenyan shillings or about three cents.

Earthoil, which buys the branches for between 17 Kenyan shillings ($0.17) and 19 Kenyan shillings ($0.19) a kilogram, extracts the tea tree oil at its local distillery and exports it to British skin-care company, The Body Shop.

Dairy cows and a TV

To meet the demands of buyers, Martin Thogoto Mwambia, 68, uses mulch - not chemical fertilisers or pesticides - on his 1.75-acre tea tree farm in Ngarariga village, in neighbouring Nyeri county. "I am mulching them with cow dung and dried leftovers of tea tree," he said with a smile while rubbing the dirt off his hands.

The farmer said he has reaped a fortune from the crop, which means he does not have to spend his old age working in menial jobs.

"Handling 50,000 Kenyan shillings ($490) and sometimes 100,000 Kenyan shillings ($990) is a miracle to me. Tea tree has given me that privilege," said Mwambia, who worked as a guard in a local firm before he began growing tea trees.

Prior to tea tree, he grew maize - but even in good years he earned far less, he said. "Sometimes when the drought is at its worst I would harvest a tin (a kilogramme) or two," said Mwambia who is now harvesting an average of 10,000kgs of tea tree branches annually from his farm.

The proceeds have enabled him to buy two dairy cows, get connected to electricity and buy a television set. "Life is better for us now. I am happy," said his wife, Jane Gathigia.

The drought-tolerant tea trees come with the advantage of a ready market, the farmers said. "Marketing maize is a headache. The prices fluctuate from time to time and farmers end up making losses," said Alice Wanja, 42, at her quarter-acre tea tree farm at Sweet Waters, about 1.5 km from Nyambura's home.

"There is nothing like that with tea tree. The buyer is already at the waiting end and the buying price is good," she said.

Long-term risks

The Laikipia County project came about through a grant from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and implemented by a local charity, Kenya Organic Agriculture Network (KOAN), which partnered with Earthoil.

Although projects of this kind guarantee farmers a reliable buyer, they do not necessarily offer security in the longterm since the buyer may go out of business or move elsewhere, warned Tom Nyamache, professor of economics at Turkana University College. On the flip side, the buyer is also at risk of closing shop if the farmers' productivity falls or fails completely, he said.

It is important that farmers plant an alternative crop that also can thrive in the changed climate conditions to serve as a fallback should their tea tree ventures fail, he said.

Earthoil's project manager, Martin Wainaina, said there is such a big demand for tea tree oil that they are making aggressive plans to expand production.

The Body Shop wants 30 tonnes of oil from the firm each year, but Earthoil can currently only supply eight tonnes, he said.

Expanding the pool of farmers is a challenge. The plants have to be grown near the distillery, as tea tree branches are bulky and difficult to transport, he said. The tea tree thrives in the volcanic soil and high altitudes in this region near Mount Kenya, Wainaina said. Expanding production to other parts of Kenya with similar arid and semi-arid climates will only be possible through research and investment in more tea tree processing, analysts say.

Nancy Chege, country programme manager at GEF-UNDP, Kenya, said scaling up tea tree farming also would depend on

continuing to look for new markets, both locally and internationally.

But "most (such) community projects... are usually sustainable because trade goes on even after the project (ends)," she said.

($1 = 101.1700 Kenyan shillings)

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