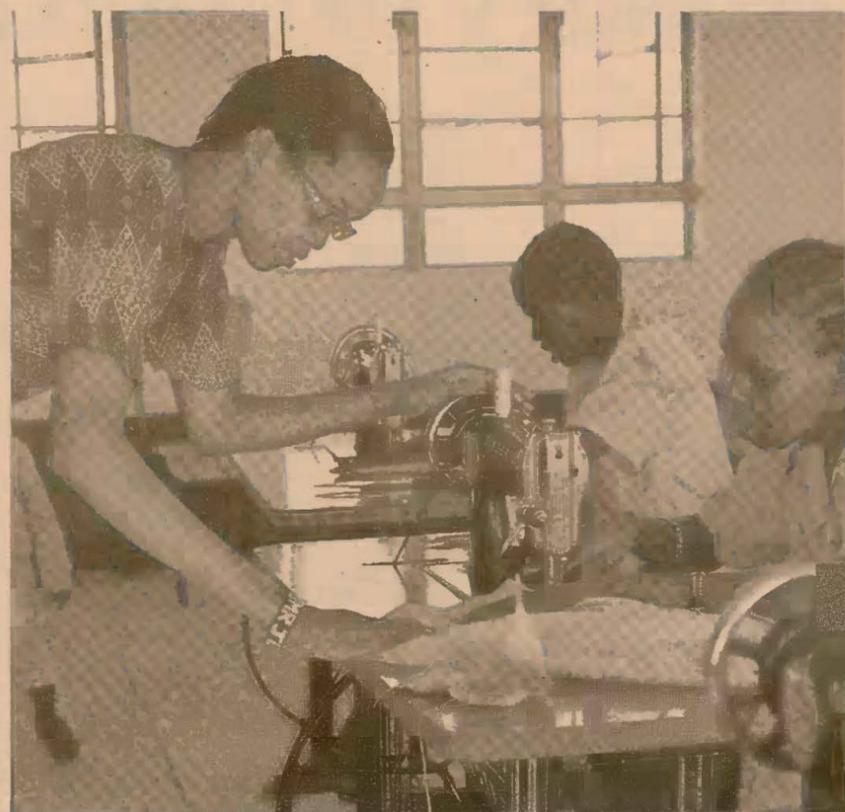


RADAR SCREEN PATRICK ALUSHULA



Lake Turkana Wind Power's turbines in Marsabit County last week. The power project runs on 365 turbines on a land lease of initial 33 years that can be extended to 99 years. -SALATON NJAU



A tailoring instructor at Lolyangalani Polytechnic in Laisamis Constituency, Marsabit County, guides students last week. The school is a project of LTWP. -SALATON NJAU

Lake Turkana wind farm opens up dry Marsabit

POWER Project is reconfiguring the grid while also investing in health, education, water and road infrastructure

For decades, the strong and steady winds flew across the remote and scarcely inhabited Loiyangalani region of Marsabit County. For long ignored as the act of nature serving to lessen the heat from the scorching sun, the wind is now changing the county – the rocky and hilly terrain, bordering Lake Turkana, that only served as a battle field for cattle rustlers.

But this is fast changing thanks to Lake Turkana Wind Power (LTWP) project.

"It was all shrubby and mostly known as a battle zone. Water was scarce and we depended on the salty lake," says Lleberes Isandap, a community adviser in Loiyangalani.

On the national grid, the LTWP project has propelled wind energy above thermal power to become the third highest power contributor after geothermal and hydro sources.

Off the grid, the project is also opening up Marsabit.

Through the LTWP corporate so-

cial responsibility arm, christened "Winds of Change," the project has pooled funds for social programmes in health, education, water and road infrastructure, setting up northern Kenya for growth.

Since 2015, the project has opened up the Loiyangalani region of Marsabit through Sh243.6 million social projects, according to Winds of Change principal social specialist Felix Rottmann.

For the next 20 years, it is expected that LTWP foundation will contribute about Sh1.13 billion (€10 million).

"For eight years, they have been dreaming with us. We have to be straight and honest with them and support them," said Mr Rottmann, adding that annually, at least €0.5 million will be pumped into social programmes.

Nonetheless, a section of Marsabit residents has sued the wind power firm, accusing it of taking over their ancestral land without following due process. The case is in court.

Late last year, when the project was complete but the government was late in constructing the transmission line to connect power to the national grid, a Sh5.7 billion fine that was levied on the Treasury for breach of contract generated a spell of testing times for the company.

When the wind power project started in 2014, the region had no roads and the investors cut through shrubs and rocks to build a 208-kilometre road from Laisamis to the wind farm.

Built at a cost of €28 million (Sh3.2 billion), LTWP has been maintaining it for the last three years. The Kenya National Highways Authority is expected to take over management this year. The road is promoting trade.

"You can now come from Nanyuki to buy honey in Kurungu. Cooler boxes were installed by GIZ Kenya to fishing communities and they can now sell fresh fish at better price," says Mr Rottmann.

The road laid the foundation for about 35 more projects in Kargi, Korr, Laisamis, Logologo, Loiyangalani and Mount Kulal wards.

In Loiyangalani, the foundation has built classes and helped county government open Loiyangalani Polytechnic which teaches mechanics, tailoring, masonry and electrical wiring.

Its principal, Gladys Mureithi says that the institution has attracted 46 students so far, having opened last year.

"We see demand. Many more are coming to make inquiries and with the road in place, the area is now accessible. The wind power project was like a springboard," she says.

The impact is also being felt at Nyiro Girls secondary school in Baragoi where the LTWP built a laboratory in 2017 and

also powered up the school using solar energy. Girls come from as far as Samburu County to use the facility.

The school was recognised among most improved in the region, having improved its mean score from 2.57 points in 2017 to 3.9 points in last year's national exams.

"With resources like these, the girls are psychologically settled. Performance in sciences has really improved," said Gedion Riungu, who teaches Mathematics and Physics.

The wind farm has also dug up new boreholes and repaired old ones in places such as Sirima and Kulal where there was an acute shortage of water.

In hospitals, water and electricity was a challenge, making it impossible for health officers to store drugs for long.

The project has put solar systems in facilities such as Ilao dispensary and Laisamis referral hospital.

"Boreholes have enhanced peace. We don't have to fight over water points now. The project has also employed many police reservists and this promotes security for us as well," said Barra Lenyoki, a resident.

Before the project started, there were a series of conversations with locals running to about eight years. Executive director Rizwan Fazal says more skill transfer can empower locals to be catalysts of change in northern Kenya.

The 310-megawatt plant runs on 365 wind turbines.

The land used for the project is leased by LTWP from Marsabit County for a term of 33 years with an option to extend twice up to 99 years.

The entire concession area is 150,000 acres though the actual project site required for the wind power project is 40,000 acres.

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