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Sourcing energy from sugar cane

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Despite the Federal Government's efforts to increase power generation, the impact has not been felt by rural farmers. To address the challenge, private firms are exploring the possibility of converting sugar cane into electricity, DANIEL ESSIET reports.

The agricultural sector is undergoing a rebirth, courtesy of public-private partnership and cutting-edge technology. But, despite the government's initiatives to develop the sector, many farmers are yet to feel the impact. The search for cheap power has prompted experts to look towards sugar cane as a source of electricity.

To this end, many private sector firms have begun the cultivation of sugar cane on a large scale.

One of such outfits is Sunti Farm which is 30 kilometres west of Mokwa in Niger State. It is owned by the Golden Sugar Company Limited. The farm has a 10,000-hectare sugar cane estate which will feed its renewable energy project.

If all goes according to plan, the company will kick-start a rebirth in the sugar industry with the conversion of sugar cane into the much-needed electricity for domestic and industrial consumers.

The major challenge to most rural farmers in Nigeria is how to generate electricity at farm mills. Not helping the issue is the fact that a large number of farmers are not connected to the national grid.

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Dr Akinwumi Adesina, said increased agricultural productivity, is vital for stimulating growth in other parts of the economy.

But achieving accelerated growth requires effective power support to the millions of small farmers, many of whom are in remote areas. For this reason, he said the government would focus on pragmatic ways to promote high-value agriculture linked to a dynamic rural farm sector.

Ultimately, to experts, success will also depend on concerted action to confront the challenges of power supply at the farms, as well as technologies for food staples production.

To this end, experts have identified various agricultural residues within the country which can be used for electricity generation. One is sugar cane.

One of the promoters, is the Group Managing Director/Chief Executive Officer, Flour Mills of Nigeria Plc. Mr. Paul Gbededo, who is convinced about the country becoming the future hub for sugar generated electricity on farms.

Although the sugarcane-based power industry is booming, only a handful of companies are developing plants.

But the crop's real potential will rely upon the sugar processing. This is what Gbededo said his company is set to achieve through its subsidiary, Golden Sugar Company Limited, owners of Sunti Golden Sugar Estate Limited.

He said the company has a 17,000 hectare Sunti farm estate.

He said the company is developing 10,000 hectares of that into sugar cane.

In the next two or three years, he said the company is planting the whole sugar cane segment of the farm. According to him, it would be producing about 100,000 metric tonnes of raw sugar.

He said while the farm will produce 100,000 metric tonnes of sugar annually, it will generate 10 mega watts of electricity.

He explained that the production of its sugar-cane electricity, will enable the development of small and medium enterprises to support the new town of Sunti and its burgeoning population.

To boost the prospect of its project, Gbededo, said a great deal of research and development is dedicated to developing new varieties of the crops with increased sugar yields, adding that within the estate farm, the company will produce raw sugar from the farm, and then refine it for table and industrial use.

So far, the company has invested \$250 million in Golden Sugar Company Limited.

Minister of Trade and Investment, Dr Olusegun Aganga describes the project as having "significant potential.

He said the company's efforts to improve infrastructure to boost production has enhanced agricultural output, with sugar cane production growing faster than the regional average.

Aganga said the government is encouraging local production of sugar cane to meet the nation's sugar need and create jobs, and refocus the economy that still relies on imports.

To achieve this, he said the government intends on implementing a full scale sugar programme to enable the nation produce over 5 million metric tonnes of sugarcane, which will far exceed the current domestic production of about 1.3 million metric per year.

With the economic crisis occasioned by the fall in oil prices, Aganga said agriculture is one of priority sectors to sustain the economy that is why the government is pushing ahead with efforts to revive sugarcane crop to tap demand for molasses, biofuel and other derivatives.

While reiterating the commitment of the government to reduce sugar importation, the minister said his organisation is pleased with the efforts of private sector organisations such as Flour Mills of Nigeria to establish large scale sugar farms such as Sunti, adding that the government is determined to implement the National Sugar Master Plan (NSMP), since it is a core component of the Nigeria Industrial Revolution Plan to create jobs, generate wealth and enhance economic growth.

The minister noted that developing the sugar sector is clear, and the sugar master plan is the roadmap. In a bid to address the energy shortage affecting the country, he said the government will support projects designed to use sugarcane for bio-electricity plant and ethanol for export. According to him, the project will make a huge difference to the Sunti communities, as well as creating stable income for farmers involved in the sugar cane supply chain.

Aganga said: "The project is in tandem with government's efforts to revive sugarcane crop for sugar production and generate other derivatives such as molasses, biofuel and other by-products."

Impressed by the investment in the farm and the construction work on the multi-billion naira sugar mill, Aganga said it was the most advanced mill in the country, evidence of government's industrial revolution plan. The sugar mill is expected to run at full capacity on completion in the 2015/2016 cropping season.

While reaffirming government's commitment to reducing sugar importation, the minister said he was pleased with the efforts of the private sector organisations such as Flour Mills of Nigeria to establish large-scale sugar farms, such as Sunti. Aganga also said that the Federal Government is determined to implement the National Sugar Master Plan (NSMP), since it is a component of the Nigeria Industrial Revolution Plan, to create jobs, wealth and enhance economic growth.

The commercial farm project, of which N16billion of the total N45billion target has been expended, covers a 16,500ha land area, expected to produce 10,000 metric tonnes of sugar annually.

Chairman, Flour Mills of Nigeria Plc, John Coumantaros, said the need for the company, through its agro-allied division, to optimise local content food and feed production as well as support government's Transformation Agenda led to the establishment of the estate in Niger State.

Estate Manager, Mr. John Beverley, said various factors make Sunti unique to sugarcane production.

The area has an established local sugarcane industry and land suitable to grow the crop.

According to Beverley, the project is in the permitting stage and is expanding the amount of sugarcane being cultivated. He expects to the project to take-off by 2016.

The sugar plant would have the capacity to process 4,500 tonnes of cane daily and 10 megawatts of electricity. A portion of that electricity will be used to power the plant and the remaining power will be used for the community.

The plant will require approximately 10,000 acres of sugarcane. The development of additional plants is scheduled to begin as soon as the first plant is operational.

He said his company is working closely with farmers to develop sugarcane plots to support production. The project, according to him, will bring a sustainable, profitable crop to the area and produce consistent streams of revenue for the farmers. The project, Beverley, said, will create numerous job opportunities in the region.

Employment will be created for 15,000 people, of which 3,500 will be direct employees and a further 3,000 will be small scale out growers.

The sugar cane farm will provide animal feed and fertiliser as by products, saving the nation over \$50 million yearly in foreign exchange .

For watchers, the government is looking to sugarcane farmers to boost the country's power generating capacity as shortages persist.

A lot of farmers who buy into the project as they face problems disposing sugar cane waste.

This mammoth project is a prime example of the private sector plan to open up the state's interior to economic activity, increase agricultural production, promote alternative exports to wean itself off the almost total reliance on extractive industries for foreign exchange and create employment.

Experts said Niger State has an excellent chance at meeting all those goals, due to several important factors including the state's natural attributes and its history as a major agricultural producer.

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