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Features

# Zampalm: A rural jewel

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WORKERS load harvested palms on a tractor to be transported to the mill for processing into crude at Zampalm oil palm tree plantation in Senior Chief Kopa's area, Kanchibiya district, Muchinga Province. PICTURE: CHARLES CHISALA



VICTOR KALALANDA, Mpika



hinterland of Mpika district.

But before this forest of palm trees had been planted, this region hardly had any trappings of comfort, save for a local school and a church mission, which could afford roofing sheets.

The story has changed since 2008, and increasingly and dramatically so after Government took over the palm plantation through the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) in 2017.

Rural Mpika now teems with life, as marked by the emergence of decent housing in the community, including growing commercial activities in the form of groceries and transportation businesses.

As a large tract of land up to 20,000 hectares, the Zampalm plantation yields enormous benefits here, providing over 2,000 local jobs during peak performance, in addition to a variety of economic gains for the country.

Initially run by Zambeef to produce palm oil, which is the world's most used and versatile vegetable oil, Zampalm is a plantation of some 409,506 palms planted over an area of 2,873 hectares in the main field, with another 39,000 seedlings in the main and pre-nursery sections. The plantation harvests palm fruit daily and the workforce goes on to process it through a mill plant, which kick-started the production of crude palm oil in 2016.

In 2015, Zampalm commissioned its first US\$1 million crushing mill plant, with a crushing capacity of two to three tonnes of fresh palm fruit per hour, producing a yield of around 18 percent of crude palm oil.

In fact, at current prices and at an average production of 3 to 3.5 tonnes per hectare, Zampalm could generate more than US\$170 million in revenue over the next decade.

In patriotic pursuit of propitious investment



percent to Zambeef, with the sole aim of enhancing what impact the plantation was having in the country.

In no time, under the new management, Zampalm rolled out an outgrower scheme, which has since attracted and benefitted over 1,000 farmers, who are currently cultivating 700 hectares of land.

With Mt Meru Millers currently as the principal off-taker for Zampalm's crude palm oil, there should be no qualms about what sort of strategic investment this plantation is for Zambia, with studies showing that the growing global demand for vegetable oils is estimated to reach 240 million tonnes by 2050

With the coming of IDC, Zampalm's commercial value and productivity have actually improved through added strategic partnerships, as observed by the plantation's general manager, David Subakanya.

"Because we're in the IDC Group, we're leveraging on other resources from other companies. For instance, we've a supplier of fertiliser within the group (Nitrogen Chemicals of Zambia), communication from Zamtel and also we use the Zambia Railways workshop. Secondly, the permanent secretary (Muchinga Province) is on the board, so we leverage on that interface to have investment. Zesco has been here, we're now connected to the national grid," says Mr Subakanya, who is an agronomist trained at the University of Zambia (UNZA).

Besides, plans to raise the area's graded road to bituminous standard are already on the cards, as mapped out by the provincial administration and Government.

The immediate impact of Zampalm on the national economy has been in the saving of foreign exchange for the country, given the resultant reduction in the importation of crude

sustainable local economy that upends rural-urban migration has emerged in Mpika, characterised by a proud population that is raring to stay, raise its families and invest in its own area.

“I’ve worked here for one year,” says – 31-year-old Faustino Banda, who studied occupational health and safety management at Copperstone University. “My job involves the workers, in terms of health. I always ensure workers are working in a safe environment and wearing personal protective equipment. The job helps me support my wife and kids in school. I’m able to survive.”

“I’m a [temporary] employee but I earn enough income to support my family. Before Zampalm, I used to sell fish. But I stopped because [scanty] rainfall has affected the fish business,” says 23-year-old Isaac Kalenga, who has one child.

With such impact, the plantation has also contributed to conservation of wildlife in the Bangweulu Game Management Area because would-be poachers now have relatively sustainable livelihoods as Zampalm workers. Though the growing of palm fruit is far more popular in the Far East due to better climatic conditions, there is really marginal difference compared to Mpika, where Zampalm is actually doing wonders by sometimes employing its own innovation such as using plastics to retain moisture for its palm trees.

It is said that the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) government under late President Levy Mwanawasa was actually hesitant to approve full development of the palm plantation because of concerns about the suitability of Zambia’s climate for such an undertaking. But the rest is now history.

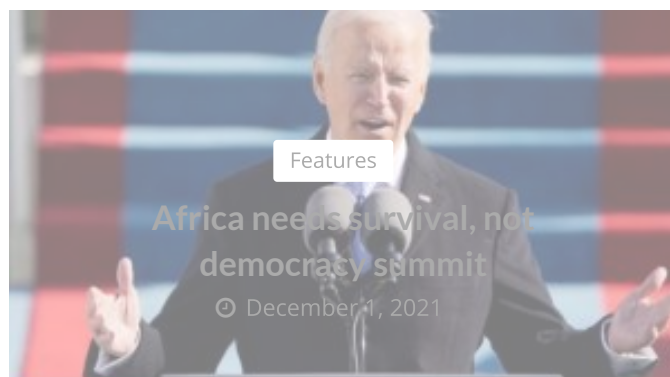
The work in the plantation is labour-intensive but visibly exciting, going by the words of the workaholic general manager himself, Mr

ever faced in my life.”

As the company continues to grow in terms of expanding its mill plant and cultivated hectarage, more positive impact will soon be felt at local level, and the national economy will ultimately soar.

It’s arguably no exaggeration, therefore, to say that Zampalm is a rural jewel.

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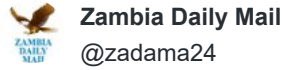




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