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## The new leaf that promises to change lives

By Andrew England

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Joseph Kahura stands at the edge of a road and surveys the coffee farm he manages as a group of men work the land with hoes alongside small, Christmas tree-like plants.

The crop, an ancient Chinese herb called artemisia, is being grown on the plantation for the first time and could potentially affect the lives of millions of Africans.

Mr Kahura hopes it will become an alternative cash crop for Kenyan farmers, particularly coffee-growers, who have seen the value of their once prized commodity plummet to all-time lows. Health officials, on the other hand, deem artemisia crucial to tackling malaria and saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of African children each year.

The herb provides a key ingredient for new, highly effective anti-malarial drugs known as artemisinin-based combination therapies (ACTs). It has been grown mostly in China and Vietnam, but a serious supply shortage threatens efforts to increase distribution of ACTs, causing health officials and pharmaceutical companies to seek to diversify its cultivation. And a tiny Kenyan company, East African Botanicals, may offer an answer.

For eight years, EAB and African Artemisia, its Tanzanian sister company, struggled to grow artemisia with little demand and virtually no resources. Now, however, they are garnering the attention of pharmaceutical companies, the World Health Organisation and the US Agency for International Development.

The group has just signed a supply agreement with Novartis, the main producer of ACTs, for this year's crop - the first of its kind for the Swiss giant outside Asia.

In response to the sudden interest, EAB is hastily trying to beef up its operations, looking for farmers to grow its seedlings and seeking investment of between \$5m (£2.7m) and \$7m to construct a plant to extract the artemisinin from the herb.

Philip McLellan, EAB managing director, says the company has secured the promise of funds from private investors to build the plant and plans to increase production from 200 hectares to about 1,500 this year.

A hectare yields up to four tons of artemisia dry leaf, which contains about 1 per cent artemisinin when grown in east Africa - higher than the content of much of the herb grown in Asia, experts say.

"The market is screaming out for supply," Mr McLellan says. "Now we are getting a market, we are able to offer farmers less risk."

The company contracts large and small-scale farmers in northern Tanzania and Kenya to cultivate the plant, which takes six to nine months to grow.

USAid, the World Health Organisation and Techno-Serve, an American non-governmental organisation, are also "very close" to an agreement with EAB to launch a

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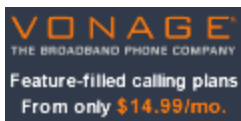
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project to assist farmers to grow the herb, officials say. "We feel it is vitally important to increase the supply of quality artemisinin-based drugs for vulnerable populations in Africa," says Matthew Lynch, a malaria adviser official with USAid, which is planning to provide \$1.2m to the project this year.

Mr Kahura, who manages

Gulmarg Estate, which is owned by Sasini, one of Kenya's largest tea and coffee producers, says his company agreed to plant nine hectares of artemisia in September in an attempt to diversify away from coffee.

"We heard about the crop and were told it was not hard to grow and decided to see if we can make a profit from it," he says.

Since 2001, 40 countries, including 20 African nations, have agreed to switch from old drugs - to which malaria has become resistant - to ACTs.


The World Health Organisation reached an agreement in 2001 with Novartis under which the pharmaceutical group would provide its ACT, Co-Artem, to the WHO at cost price for public sector use in developing countries where malaria is endemic.

"We want artemisia grown in Africa as soon as possible, but we want a strong market and market growth in the future," says Allan Schapira of WHO. In the short term, the addition to existing supplies will be relatively minor, perhaps 10 per cent of the volume from Asia, he says. "But the data we have looked at so far indicates the yield is very good in east Africa," he adds, "so there is potential for east Africa to play an important role."

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