

Controversial Lake Natron soda ash project still in limbo

Title Soda ash project in Lake Natron, Arusha Region, could face further delays to take off owing to lack of required clearance from environmental authorities. Soda ash is a basic raw material used in the processing and chemical industries President Jakaya Kikwete has directed the ash be extracted to benefit the nation but the directive could serve little to have the project implemented because the investors, Tata from India, and site developer, the National Development Corporation (NDC) were yet to meet set conditions on technical matters. The lake straddles Tanzania/Kenya border in Loliondo District. On a tour of the ministry of Industries and Trade in April the President queried the delay and directed the project be speeded up for the benefit the country, the same way as neighbouring Kenya benefits from soda ash from Lake Magadi. The project to extract sodium carbonate, which at initial proposal attracted attention from environmentalists, was halted in 2009 as it was feared it could cause a big risk on the lake, especially the bird species, Lesser Flamingo, which breeds at Lake Natron. NDC was quoted last October as saying it had picked the Institute of Resources Assessment (IRA) of the University Dar es Salaam University to carry out social and environmental impact assessment. NDC Managing Director Gideon Nasari then said the assessment would have assisted to clear the air over the project. **NEMC's position** However, the National Environmental Management Council (NEMC) told The Guardian on Sunday this week that it was yet to receive the ordered second assessment report, almost 12 months down the line. A written statement from NEMC's Director of environmental impact assessment, Ignas Mchallo reads: "The Council has not received any environmental impact assessment report after the first one." The statement adds that Government has the obligation to make available specific information such as hydrological data and the Lake Natron Ramsar site Management Plan, wishing to undertake development in the area. There are also other things like ecological aspects that both the developer and the government need to acquire in-depth understanding of ahead of development interventions. "The Government commissioned a study under the Vice President's Office to furnish the information that would be needed in reviewing the Environmental Impact Assessment report for this specific project. These are yet to be concluded," said Mchallo. NEMC says further that in addition to studies that the government may undertake, the developer was also to carry out both scientific and technical studies that might be required to come up with acceptable environmental impact assessment. **Second EAI** NEMC says four specific factors were to be made clear in the second assessment as follows; Key plant process issues such as the chemistry, quality and quantity of the products (both the commodities and wastes) and related type and significance of impacts. The second factor was the project components which were not covered in the first EIA studies like the access roads, the food chain, the hydrology, the lake water chemistry and the socio-economic structures of the communities living in that area. Other two key factors are: sitting of the plant and its other establishments considering impacts of lighting, noise,

discharges and other pertinent features as well as cost-benefit analysis to include the tourism potential in the long term. Tata of India finally abandoned the project whereby it had planned to build the plant on the shore of Lake Natron following criticism from conservationists. The company was expected to invest \$400million to extract estimated 500,000 tonnes of soda ash from the lake per annum and expected to employ 1,200 construction workers and 152 permanent employees. According to NEMC, Lake Natron is a Ramsar site and home to 70 percent of the world's population of the Lesser Flamingo. There are special conditions that make these birds flourish in that place, some of which include wilderness, breeding habitat and food chain. It is estimated that there are 2.5 million of Lesser Flamingo at Lake Natron, which is the only regular breeding area in East Africa. They feed on a blue & green algae, known as spirulina. The lake has a shallow depth of less than three metres (10 feet) and varies in width depending on its water level which changes due to high evaporation, leaving high levels of salts and other minerals. The extraction of soda ash would among other things involve construction of a factory, during which it would be pumping a large amount of water from lake to the factory and adding fresh water to the lake, a fact raising fears of affecting the lake's level of salinity. Deputy Minister for Industries and Trade Lazaro Nyalandu told The Guardian on Sunday this week that the project could not take off until all matters raised by environmentalists were cleared. "I am aware of the challenges facing this project" but we must strike a balance between the economical benefits and environmental requirements," Nyalandu said during an interview.