Jatropha, best of biofuels?

Bioenergy provides an opportunity for rural Africans to move out of poverty through access to modern forms of energy that will help investment in agriculture. And what is more, the Jatropha plant, available in Africa since the 16th century, is not only at the core of the bioenergy revolution, it is also easy to grow and has the potential of creating millions of jobs in rural Africa. **Victoria Ferris** reports.

FOOD, FUEL, AND FINANCE ARE the three great crises that have shocked the world in recent years. This threefold calamity requires active responses on a global scale, yet developing and low-polluter countries are suffering the worst effects of climate change, and in many cases are left helpless. Much ink has been spilled describing how African countries are particularly vulnerable to climate change due to their heavy reliance on climate-sensitive industries such as agriculture, forestry, and fisheries but few talk about implementing potential remedies.

If the world remains on this disastrous course, African agriculture will continue to be painfully affected. Freak changes in water availability have already led to a significant decline in rainfall across the continent. East Africa's rains, when they come at all, are heavier with intense storms, leading to crop losses and other destruction. In West Africa, all along the Abidjan-Lagos corridor, extreme floods throughout May and June 2009 brought devastation and a heavy death toll.

It is, therefore, only sensible for people to advocate for the world's biggest emitters of carbon dioxide to reverse the consequences by cutting their emissions. In those countries, and in Africa too, alternative energies exist, and must be utilised.

It is against this background that a Green Power Conference was held in Accra, Ghana from 26-29 October. It hosted the Bioenergy Markets West Africa Symposium with 100 select participants and speakers to identify both the financial risks and the great potential for financing African bioenergy production.

There was a consensus that bioenergy provides a multiplicity of benefits to African economies. The mood throughout the four-day event was that bioenergy represents an opportunity for the vast majority of rural Africans to move out of poverty through access to modern forms of energy that will help investment in agriculture. In order to alleviate poverty and to grow their economies, African countries need energy security, and there are a variety of options such as harnessing the hydropower of the vast Congo River and other major waterways in Africa, to utilising photovoltaic solar panels, wind turbines, and bioenergy crops such as jatropha or sugarcane. If agriculture can produce its own energy from biowaste, and use rotational crops to replenish soils, it will represent a huge leap in the right direction.

With enormous unmet demand for electricity (only 16% of the continent is electrified), ample labour resources, and abundant land mixed with the proven technology to convert biomass for elec-