

Lab-grown diamonds robbing southern Africa of riches

AFP | Johannesburg, South Africa

Botswana and southern African peers that built much of their prosperity on diamonds are scrambling for alternatives as cheaper, lab-grown stones threaten their economies.

Diamond-dependent Botswana is leading the way and launched a sovereign wealth fund this week to lay the “foundation for a more resilient, sustainable and diversified future beyond diamonds”.

It is exploring other avenues too, like boosting luxury wild-life tourism, launching into the medicinal cannabis market and



A picture taken at De Beers office in Gaborone shows diamonds from Botswana diamonds mines. Botswana and its southern African peers that built much of their prosperity on diamond pulled from the earth are scrambling for alternatives as cheaper, lab-grown stones are already undercutting their economies, analysts say.

“Countries such as Angola, Namibia and South Africa are all exposed but not to the same degree as Botswana,” economist Brendon Verster at the Oxford Economics Africa think tank told AFP.

The stones are the country’s main source of income and account for about 30 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) and 80 percent of its exports, according to the International Monetary Fund.

But, as consumers turn to cheaper diamonds created in China and India, the average price of a one-carat natural diamond is falling.

The price dropped from a peak of \$6,819 in May 2022 to \$4,997 by December 2024, according to the World Diamond Council.

Botswana, which is 70 percent desert, was lifted from poverty by the discovery of diamonds in the 1960s. It is already feeling the effects of the lab-grown competition.

‘Risks of economic collapse’

As its foreign reserves deplete, the government has turned to debt to fill the public coffers.

Government funds ran so low that the health system teetered on the verge of collapse in August, leading Boko to declare a state of emergency.

“If left unaddressed, there is a real risk of the situation becoming not just an economic challenge but a social time bomb,” he said in July.

Highlighting the fears, global ratings agency S&P on Friday

dropped its long-term ratings on Botswana one notch to “BBB” and declared a negative outlook, citing the rapid expansion of the lab-diamond market.

Synthetic stones had captured “approximately 20 percent of the global market by value and up to 50 percent by volume in the US engagement ring segment in 2025,” it said in a statement.

Diversification is “essentially now or never”, Verster said.

“We don’t really see anything that would cause a monumental shift back in favour of natural diamonds to curb the rising popularity of synthetic diamonds.”

Also suffering is tiny Lesotho, where diamonds contribute up to 10 percent of its \$2 billion GDP and the larger, vital textile market has been hit by US tariffs.

This month its biggest diamond mine, Letseng, said it would lay off a fifth of its workforce, citing “sustained pricing pressure” and “softer demand in key markets”.

The mine closures “could heighten risks of economic collapse”, independent economic analyst Thabo Qhesi told AFP, stressing an urgent need to explore other options, such as rare-earth resources.

The ‘real thing’

In a bid to keep the sparkle alive, Angola, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo pledged in June to allocate one percent of their annual diamond revenues to marketing natural diamonds.

The campaign would need to reframe their value as a coveted “luxury product”, former Bank of Botswana deputy governor Keith Jefferis told AFP.

“We see a significant oppor-

tunity to engage consumers in the story of responsibly sourced diamonds from Botswana,” De Beers, also taking part, told AFP.

The South Africa-British firm is meanwhile exploring the potential of synthetic diamonds in high-tech fields like quantum networks and semiconductors, as prices fall below \$100 per carat.

For Botswanan ministry of minerals official Jacob Thamage, natural and lab-made diamonds “offer different value propositions to different consumers and therefore can and will coexist”.

In an upscale Johannesburg mall, behind fortified steel gates, a natural yellow diamond priced at over \$50,000 stood as a symbol of exclusivity.

Just steps away, a lab-grown diamond valued at \$115 was unguarded.

“We each have our target,” one jeweller said. “So long as everyone is happy.”



workers using helium gas to produce natural diamonds at HVK International manufacturing firm in Surat.



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Natural diamonds are older than life on Earth – most formed 1 to 3 billion years ago deep within the Earth’s mantle, long before plants, animals, or even the atmosphere we breathe today existed.

exploiting its abundant sunshine for solar power.

President Duma Boko has even mooted taking a majority stake in industry giant De Beers and selling Botswana’s diamonds independently.

Kenya’s only breastmilk bank, life-line for premature babies

AFP | Nairobi, Kenya

Surrounded by incubators, a red tube snaking into her tiny nose, four-day-old Grace-Ella is being fed donated breastmilk at the only facility in Kenya that offers the life-giving service.

The breastmilk bank at Pumwani Maternity Hospital is one of very few across sub-Saharan Africa, and is especially helpful for premature babies, of which roughly 134,000 are born each year in Kenya.

Mothers who give birth prematurely are often unable to produce breastmilk and must rely on formula, which can be less nutritious and increases the risk of infection, especially since water is often contaminated.

The milk bank in Nairobi, established in 2019 with the support of British aid money and PATH, an NGO, allows babies like Grace-Ella to benefit from the generosity of others.

“It was super-exciting,” her mother Margaret Adhiambo, 28, told AFP, adding she had not heard of the programme before she delivered prematurely at 30 weeks.

“Before I accepted, I was a bit sceptical because it gave me some feeling of guilt like I could



Hannah Wangeci Maina, a senior nurse gestures towards reserves donated breastmilk preserved in a freezer to await screening at a human milk bank in the Pumwani Maternity Hospital, Nairobi

not give my daughter my own breastmilk.”

But “it helped me because my daughter didn’t starve, at least she got some food,” she added.

‘Good to help’

Underweight babies face a daunting array of risks and breastmilk can, quite literally, tip the scales in their favour.

“When we feed them human milk we find they are growing faster compared to a baby who is getting formula,” said Muthoni Ogola, the doctor heading the

programme.

Yet the World Health Organization (WHO) says fewer than half of all infants worldwide are exclusively breastfed.

A key advantage of breastmilk is the antibodies passed to the infant, said Pumwani nurse Hannah Wangeci Maina.

She moves with the efficiency needed for a maternity ward that cares for at least 90 mothers and babies at a time.

“We usually have many mothers lining up to receive the expressed breastmilk,” she said.



Margaret Adhiambo (R), 28, checks on her daughter, Grace-Ella, delivered pre-term an incubator-station for babies born ahead of schedule at the Pumwani Maternity Hospital, Nairobi

On a recent visit by AFP, she helped first-time mother Esther Wanjiru, 22, through the process of donating.

Wanjiru was given counselling and tests for diseases including HIV and hepatitis before sitting to pump.

The milk was then tested, both pre- and post-pasteurisation, and then frozen, allowing it to be stored for up to a year.


“It feels good to help... It sort of feels like a massage,” Wanjiru told AFP with a shy grin.

Funding shortfall

For the hospital team, it is frustrating that they only have enough equipment to provide milk to hospitalised children on the ward, as well as occasional donations to two other hospitals.

It is a much cheaper option than formula, but the equipment is expensive, said hospital CEO Christine Kiteshuo.

“Some of this equipment can only be found in Europe (or) the US, so it becomes a problem for us to procure,” Kiteshuo told



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Breast milk isn’t the same every day – its composition changes over time to meet a baby’s needs. For example, milk produced right after birth (called colostrum) is thick, yellowish, and packed with antibodies, while later milk contains more fat and calories to support rapid growth.

AFP.

The hospital would love to help mothers out in the community, especially since many live in informal settlements without fridges or clean running water.

“That becomes one of the challenges that we experience right now -- that we cannot help the mothers outside the facility,” said Kiteshuo.