OPEC Fund Projects finally crossing Indian Ocean

By DAILY NEWS Reporter

TAKING another move, the Tanzania Social Action Fund (TASAF) is preparing to extend its development footprint beyond the mainland, and this time the winds of change are blowing across the Indian Ocean. According to TASAF Executive Director Shedrack Mziray, community development projects financed through the OPEC Fund are set to begin in Zanzibar, covering both Unguja and Pemba islands. For Zanzibar residents, this means that development assistance is no longer something heard about on the evening news from the mainland, but something that will soon be felt at village level, quite possibly closer than the nearest ferry terminal.

The OPEC Fund, supported by some of the world's major oil-producing countries, exists to ensure that development is not restricted to glossy capital cities or well-connected regions alone. Its core mission is to support social development projects in areas where access to essential services such as water, health, education and basic infrastructure remains limited. In short, the Fund is less interested in where oil flows and more concerned with where clean water does not.

Speaking to journalists at Karatu District Council in Arusha Region in late December 2025, Mr Mziray explained that TASAF is currently knocking on OPEC's door once again. This time, however, it is not a modest knock. TASAF is applying for additional funding aimed at expanding projects into more regions than those covered during the first and second phases of the programme. If all goes well, this new phase could be the biggest yet, both in ambition and geographic reach.

"We are looking to apply for more than 100 million US dollars, if our OPEC partners agree," Mziray said, carefully balancing optimism with realism. He was quick to add that TASAF operates within a wider national context where government priorities are many and resources must be shared. Major infrastructure projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway also require significant investment, meaning the government must decide just how much funding can reasonably be allocated to TASAF.

Still, Zanzibar's turn has come. In the upcoming OPEC-supported programme, TASAF plans to implement projects in both Unguja and Pemba, with the aim of promoting inclusive development. Mr Mziray emphasised that Tanzania is one United Republic and that the benefits of national development must be shared fairly. As he put it, everyone deserves a slice of the national cake, not just those sitting closest to the serving table.

Reflecting on the programme's history, Mr Mziray explained that TASAF's engagement with OPEC funding has evolved steadily over time. The initial phase focused on just two regions, Lindi and Mtwara, where projects were implemented over a period of ten years. These regions served as a testing ground, proving that targeted social investments could deliver tangible results when sustained over time.



TANZANIA Social Action Fund Executive Director Shedrack Mziray (right), accompanied by Communication Specialist Desta Laizer, addresses journalists during the event.

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Encouraged by this success, TASAF expanded the programme to include Arusha and Njombe, where projects were implemented for five years. Later, Mwanza, Simiyu and Geita were added, bringing the total number of participating regions to five. In these regions, the programme once again ran for ten years, embedding itself into local development efforts and addressing long-standing gaps in social services.

In financial terms, the growth has been equally notable. The first OPEC phase was valued at 16 million US dollars and focused on Lindi and Mtwara. The second phase increased significantly to 50 million US dollars. Now, TASAF is preparing to request up to 100 million US dollars, reflecting both the scale of remaining needs and the confidence gained from previous phases. Simply put, once you have seen what a small bucket of water can do, you are more confident asking for a bigger one when the fire is larger.

Selecting which communities benefit from these projects is not done by spinning a map or following headlines. Mr Mziray explained that TASAF relies on clear criteria, with the primary factor being the level of shortage of social services within local government authorities. This assessment is backed by statistical data that highlights regions lagging behind in development indicators. Numbers, in this case, do not lie, even when regions appear wealthy on the surface.

This explains why OPEC-funded projects have been implemented in regions such as Shinyanga, Geita, Simiyu and Mwanza as areas often associated with mineral wealth. To some observers, this may seem counterintuitive. After all, how can regions rich in gold still be poor in social services? Mr Mziray addressed this apparent contradiction directly, noting that despite natural resources, many of these regions continue to face serious shortages in essential services. TASAF's role, therefore, is to complement government efforts by addressing these gaps headon, rather than assuming that mineral wealth automatically translates into better living conditions.

He also highlighted Katavi Region as a striking example. Despite being one of the country's most productive agricultural regions, Katavi remains among those with the fewest social services. In contrast, Dodoma Region has experienced rapid development following the relocation of government offices, proving how quickly fortunes can change when attention and investment align. Meanwhile, Singida Region is set to become one of TASAF's priority areas in the upcoming OPEC programme, reflecting its continued need for improved social services.

Mr Mziray was clear that the guiding principle remains consistent: OPEC projects go where social services are lacking. Stories emerging from areas such as Simiyu, Maswa, or remote parts of Geita reveal deep-rooted challenges that only become clearer when viewed collectively. These are not isolated problems, but patterns that demand sustained intervention.

As a result, Singida will feature prominently in the next phase, while regions such as Geita, Simiyu and Mwanza will not be revisited, having already benefited from previous interventions. According to Mr Mziray, discussions with Members of Parliament from those regions confirm that positive results have been achieved, offering reassurance that the investments delivered real impact rather than disappearing into paperwork.

Closer to Karatu, Mr Mziray pointed to communities such as the Hadzabe and various pastoralist groups who live more than 150 kilometres from the town. Their daily realities differ sharply from urban life, underscoring why distance and isolation remain critical factors in development planning. What appears adequate in town can feel worlds away in remote settlements.

In closing, Mziray acknowledged that development needs across the country remain immense. However, he also expressed appreciation for the government's ongoing efforts to improve citizens' lives, particularly through the expansion of essential social services. With Zanzibar now included in TASAF's plans, the message is clear: Development may move in phases, but eventually, it is meant to reach everyone and even those separated by water, distance, or long-standing neglect.

Life without birth certificate feels invisible, nonexistent

MANY people may take their birth certificate, or similar official papers, for granted - hidden in a drawer and rarely seeing the light of day - but for those without one, it can lead to a shadow life or an uncertain existence.

This is thought to affect millions of people around the world, described as stateless, and 25-year-old South African Arnold Ncube is one of those.

Because he has no state-issued documents, washing cars in the backstreets of Thembisa township near Johannesburg is one of the few ways he can make a living.

He was born in Johannesburg and his father is South African, qualifying him for citizenship here. But when he tried to register for secondary school, he realised he didn't have a birth certificate.

Having been abandoned by his parents - his dad left before he was born and his mum when he was 14 - he could not prove his status.

"It's a painful thing," he says. "You're basically invisible. You don't exist. It's like you're living in the shadows. You don't have a bank account; you can't apply for a decent job that you can earn a living with." He adds that he tries to stay positive but it's been challenging.



CHRISTY Chitengu only found out at 17 that she was stateless

"That person that's affected by statelessness will not be able to contribute fully to that country that is hosting. So we think that it's important that as a matter of inclusion, all issues of statelessness are addressed so that all these people on the margins of society can contribute fully to society and the economy."

"When I see my peers, they are done with school now. Whereas I couldn't study further. It's a lot. Depression was once my friend."

Arnold is one of at least an estimated 10,000 stateless people living in South Africa who, despite being born here, are struggling to prove their nationality and access public services.

There are no official statistics available on stateless people here because they tend to slip through the cracks. So, the figures are based on estimations by organisations like the UN's refugee agency, the UNHCR and civil rights organisations.

With no citizenship, stateless people cannot get documents and struggle to get access to basic necessities including education and healthcare.

Statelessness is caused by many factors, including administrative barriers and poor record-keeping. As a result, the real number of stateless people is hard to gauge in many parts of the world. Human rights lawyer and advocate Christy Chitengu used to be stateless herself.

She only got South African citizenship three years ago with the help of the organisation Lawyers for Human Rights who worked on her case for free.

"I found out I was stateless at the age of 17. My high school principal called me into her office and told me that she didn't have any documents for me and that she didn't understand how I'd gotten into the school," she tells the BBC near her home in northern Johannesburg.

"I was born in Johannesburg to two foreign parents [both from Zimbabwe] and at my birth I was given a handwritten South African birth certificate." But officials in South Africa need a printed certificate.

Christy says that when she found out she was stateless she looked into taking her parents' nationality but it was too late.

"I couldn't claim my Zimbabwean citizenship because by that time I was 16 and they wouldn't allow me to do a late birth registration. Also, I would have had to physically leave South Africa to get a Zimbabwean passport and without any documents to leave the country, I wouldn't be allowed back in."

South Africa has large numbers of undocumented migrants and the authorities and local vigilante groups have been trying to crack down on irregular migration for years.

When asked whether giving stateless children citizenship could be seen as a reward to undocumented migrants who give birth in South Africa, Christy disagrees.

"I think citizenship is not a reward. It's an entitlement for someone to be able to live a dignified life and for someone to be seen as a human being. I think if we look at it through that lens, we realise that there's nothing that we lose by recognising a child who would otherwise not be able to go to primary school or receive healthcare."

On several occasions, the BBC contacted the home affairs department, which handles immigration issues in South Africa, to find out how it is tackling the issue of statelessness but got no reply.

Statelessness is not just an issue here, it is a huge global problem

There's an estimated 4.5 million stateless people around the world. Some say the figure could even be as high as 15 million.

Experts believe tackling the problem requires policy changes, including allowing refugees to register their children where they're born, and giving mothers the right to pass their nationality to their children.

"For us statelessness is not just a legal issue, it's a matter that involves the right to development," says Jesus Perez Sanchez who works for the UNHCR.

"That person that's affected by statelessness will not be able to contribute fully to that country that is hosting. So we think that it's important that as a matter of inclusion, all issues of statelessness are addressed so that all these people on the margins of society can contribute fully to society and the economy."

Back in Thembisa, Arnold is playing football with local children. After years of struggle, he now has a lawyer helping him fight for the papers that prove he belongs here. He wants to go back to school to study computer science. He hopes having documents will lead to a brighter future.

Source: BBC