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ONE) – WASTAGES CONTRIBUTE TO NIGERIA TRILLION NAIRA FOOD IMPORTS

The premises of the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) was agog penultimate Friday as government officials, including the minister of Agriculture, Akin Adesina, met with leading researchers, policymakers and donors to discuss opportunities on value chain development in cassava processing.

Better and improved cassava varieties helped Nigerian farmers to boost production by 10 million tons between 2002 and 2009, making the country to overtake Thailand as the world's biggest producer of cassava.

The crop, which is consumed by millions of Nigerians, is also an important industrial crop that provides starch and other products for confectionery, sweeteners, glues, plywood, textiles, paper, biodegradable products, monosodium glutamate, and drugs. Cassava chips and pellets are used in animal feed and alcohol production.

But the opportunities for making this a major revenue earner for the country have not been realised. In a way, experts say, this has been representative of the challenges facing our Agriculture sector, which seriously limit the nation's food production capacity. Little wonder the country spent trillions of Nigeria every year to import food.

Mr. Adesina, on assumption of office last month, disclosed that over N635 billion was spent to import wheat, N365 billion on rice, N217 billion on sugar, and N97 billion on fish importation. Post-harvest losses which occurs largely to the absence of viable storage and processing facilities, are some of these challenges which have impoverished farmers and dampened their enthusiasm for farming.

At present, 12 silos are distributed across the country, with a combined storage capacity of 300,000 tonnes for assorted grains, beans and garri, while 20 additional silos are being planned to further raise the joint storage capacity of the nation's silos to 1.3 million tones.

Foluke Oluwatoyinbo, Provost of the Federal College of Agriculture, Ibadan, explained that post-harvest losses largely arose from multiple sources, namely pests and diseases, natural disasters, careless human actions and inadequate storage and processing. "People are producing foods but we lose a lot of them because we do not have the facilities to preserve and store them," she said.

Ms Oluwatoyinbo said Nigeria's peculiar weather condition is not kind to food preservation without the aid of refrigerators and other storage and preservation devices, stressing that most foods produced in Nigeria are perishable at harvest.

A journalist, Nkechi Okoronkwo, who reports the agriculture sector, corroborated such a viewpoint. "I was at the Orange Market in Mararaba, near Abuja, a few days ago and saw the huge volume of assorted fruit available at the market, many of which were bound to waste away because of their perishable nature, if not bought immediately," she said. "In other lands and climes, such seasonal and perishable products are processed and stored in manners that make them available to consumers even when they are off-season."

She advocated that states and local governments should be involved in providing storage facilities for farmers, so as to minimize post-harvest loses and make for food availability all-year-round. Ms Oluwatoyinbo underscored the necessity for effective storage of produce with the aid of refrigeration, noting however, that the poor electricity supply in the country limited such an option.

A resort to solar energy to power such systems, she pointed out, would be too expensive for the average Nigerian farmers, stressing the necessity for the Federal Government to invest more in thermal and hydro-electricity. "The cheapest source of electricity today is still the national grid and it is unfortunate that we are where we are today in terms of power supply," she said. She said it was imperative for agricultural stakeholders to understand the agricultural value chain, which went beyond planting to include harvesting, storage, processing and marketing.

Adebayo Sodiq, Chairman of the Oyo State chapter of the Association of Cashew Growers and Buyers, stated that about 50 per cent of cashew fruits produced in Nigeria annually, for instance, goes to waste due to lack of storage facilities. He said the situation was compounded by lack of foreign and local investments in storage and processing of the fruit into packages to span all seasons. "I don't know why foreigners have not shown interest. Maybe they still feel that the investment climate in the country is not favourable enough," he said.

Cashew farmers are not alone in this predicament, as sweet potato farmers have also bemoaned losses suffered over the years, due to lack of silos for sweet potato storage.

Susan Phillips, the National Women Leader of Potato Growers Association of Nigeria, recently complained that huge volumes of potatoes are wasted annually, leading to enormous losses by growers.

She said while the provision of storage facilities for grains by governments were appreciated, such facilities should be holistic to cover other agricultural products including sweet potato. "The Federal Government should broaden the strategic grains reserve programme and the construction of silos, by integrating facilities for storage of other ranges of agricultural produces," he said.

Chairman of the Osun chapter of the All Farmers Association of Nigeria (AFAN), Raheem Adeniji, also called on the Federal Government to provide more agricultural storage facilities for use by different categories of farmers across the country, to minimise wastage of agricultural produce.

According to him, very few farmers have the means to build and operate their own storage facilities and, even at that, such capacities would be very limited for the quantum of produce from their farms. "The number of grain silos in some states is not enough. Other perishable farm produce have to be catered for as only very few rich farmers can afford to build any form of storage facility," Mr. Adeniji said. While the likes of Mr. Adeniji applaud government's initiative at diversifying the nation's economy, they also ask farmers to brace to the challenge of embracing large-scale farming. "The rush to make agriculture viable will be for nothing if storage facilities are not put in place to stem the avalanche of losses experienced yearly by Nigerian farmers, who lose their perishable crops not sold on time," Mr. Adeniji said.

In his opinion, the availability of foods, when off-season, was a prime indicator of the capacity of a nation to meet its food requirement for the populace; especially in the case of Nigeria, which plans to be one of the world's 20 best economies by 2020. "A starting point will be for the Federal Government to establish silos in all states of the federation with immediate dispatch," he said.

Monopoly on storage silos

The Director-General of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Ibadan, Peter Hartmann is however of the view that the private sector must play a crucial role to fill some gaps. According to him, post-harvest loss in Africa opens a vista of untapped opportunities for agro-processors willing to invest in the continent.

Mr. Hartmann, who officially ends his tenure at IITA in October, said the opportunities came at a time when crop improvement programs by the Institute and national partners had offered better varieties and increased yields. "This makes the private sector a key partner at providing solutions to the losses," he said.

The IITA boss explained that Kenya, for instance, loses 50 per cent of the bananas it produced annually, while Nigeria, which had the second biggest economy in sub-Saharan Africa, loses an estimated one-third of its annual harvests in some produce, due largely to poor storage management. "Even in countries that are famine-prone, post-harvest losses are still a huge challenge," he said. "Choose any market in Africa and take a walk during the close of the day and you will see heaps of foods that are lying waste." He said that over the years, IITA in collaboration with national partners had developed technologies to tackle post-harvest losses via processing of Africa's major staples; including cassava, maize, bananas and cowpea.

Mr. Hartmann, however, said that such an effort had been done piecemeal and on test sites, stressing the imperative for a pan-African effort that would involve small and big private sector participants. "Africa needs more investments in processing and packaging of agricultural products, as the current number of agricultural processing firms was low, compared with the demand," he said. Notwithstanding this gloomy picture, IITA's efforts have yielded several benefits to Africa's agriculture as work in the Institute's biological control efforts had saved Africa's cassava against a variety of pests and diseases. Many analysts, no doubt, agree with Mr. Hartmann that commercial and private agricultural storage is a gold mine waiting to be explored in Nigeria and Africa in general.

Some private food producers however say they are not impressed with what they term 'pseudo monopoly' of the silos by the government. High charges and other administrative bottlenecks are some of the complaints by persons and organisations who desire to use the silos to store their produce after harvests.

A former Oyo State Commissioner for Agriculture, Kunle Ishola, complained about the high charges on the use of grain silos located in the Monatan area of Ibadan, which even the state government found uncomfortable. He also expressed reservations at the prices at which the grains from the silos were sold, saying that they were excessive.

Although the federal government must play the pivotal role in boosting food storage and processing facilities in the country, to avoid the needless wastage of huge volumes of farm produce, analysts say there must also be private sector involvement in the provision of such facilities, provided government offers such investors attractive incentives. (A Forum)

TWO) –SOUTH AFRICA AND TANZANIA SIGN AGRICULTURE MOU

Senior South African and Tanzanian officials signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on Saturday that they hope will further develop agricultural ties between the two countries.

Minister of international relations and co-operation Maite Nkoana-Mashabane said after signing the MOU in Pretoria, that the agreement would see joint agricultural research, the exchange of experts and an improvement of agricultural technology in the region.

Tanzania's agricultural minister Jumanne Maghembe said he hoped the agreement would be one of the steps to making the continent self sufficient.

Asked if commercial farmers from South Africa were being encouraged to begin farming operations in the country, he said that a number of South African companies had shown an interest in Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania. SAGCOT is a public-private partnership which Tanzania hopes will boost agricultural productivity. (The New Age)

THREE) - ANGOLA'S STATE OIL COMPANY WANTS TO SUPPLY ZAMBIA AND NAMIBIA

Sociedade Nacional de Combustíveis de Angola, E.P., or Sonangol, is the Angolan state oil company, with the sole concession for oil and gas exploration in Angola's subsoil and continental shelf.

Sonangol executive Mateus Neto announced that the company intends to construct an oil storage facility in Menongue district in the country's southern Kuando Kubango province, which, when complete, will enable Sonangol to supply Angola's entire population, as well as Zambia and Namibia, AngolaPress news agency reported. The facility is projected to become operational in March 2012.

Sonangol has been investing some of its oil revenues abroad. On 27 April the Sao Tome and Principe government signed an agreement with Sonangol to rehabilitate and modernize the country's only port, Ana Chaves, and its sole international airport. According to Sao Tome and Principe Planning and Development Minister Agostinho Fernandes, a private company was created to manage and administer the port and international airport, with Sonangol holding 80 percent of shares and the Sao Tome government retaining the remaining 20 percent.

But Sonangol has also experienced recent setbacks, as last month U.S. independent Cobalt International

Energy revealed it is to abandon an exploratory well in Angolan waters, Bicular #1 in Angola's offshore Block 21 when the initial test bore over pressured water sand with limited quantities of natural gas (OilPrice.com)

FOUR) - HORN OF AFRICA: U.N. SHARES RESPONSIBILITY IN FAMINE, EXPERTS SAY

The United Nations Human Rights Council should accept responsibility, on behalf of the world forum, for the famine spreading through eastern Africa, and should call for member countries' cooperation to overcome the desperate food crisis there, experts said.

One of the 18 independent experts on the advisory committee to the Council, Chilean academic José Antonio Bengoa, set forth the idea of asking for an urgent special session, in an attempt to draw the attention of the international community to the gravity of the crisis in the Horn of Africa.

At its seventh session, which opened in Geneva Monday Aug. 8 and ends Friday Aug. 12, the advisory committee decided to send a letter to the [Human Rights Council](#) requesting that it consider holding a special session, in accordance with Bengoa's proposal.

Bengoa described the famine conditions in five countries in the region: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, which require immediate action by the Council, the United Nations' top human rights body. However, the World Food Programme (WFP) "is utterly bankrupt at the moment," Bengoa said.

Left in the lurch by defaulting donors, the WFP is in "a scandalous situation, and it barely has enough food for the next few days," he said.

Jean Ziegler of Switzerland, another expert on the advisory committee, and a former U.N. special rapporteur on the right to food (2000-2008), said Bengoa's idea for the Council to issue a declaration about the famine "is a useful proposal, because the U.N. and non-governmental organisations are helpless in the face of this appalling catastrophe."

Over the past two years the WFP's budgeted income has been pruned by half, Ziegler told IPS. In 2008 it received six billion dollars, but this year it has only 2.8 billion dollars in hand, he said.

Major Western donor countries have bailed out their banks to the tune of billions of dollars, while drastically cutting down on development aid, and especially emergency assistance, he said.

In consequence, Ziegler said, the WFP is having to refuse help to refugees arriving at the camps. The WFP simply lacks the money to help the number of people in need.

[Tens of thousands of people have likely died](#) since April, the expert said. According to the WFP, 11 million people are in urgent need of food.

In the circumstances, a declaration from the U.N. Human Rights Council might stir some consciences and prompt people to act. It would at least force countries - officially committed to protecting the human right to food - to pay their contributions to the WFP, Ziegler hoped.

Bengoa, who describes himself as "pragmatic", acknowledged that the situation is complex, because at the moment the rest of the world is concerned about the economic crisis in the United States and other rich countries of the North. "Obviously, the purse strings are tightly tied and will not be loosened soon. Feeding starving children in the emergency camps in Africa is not going to improve the crises in the U.S. or Europe," he said. Nevertheless, "it is very important for the advisory committee to make a statement, and for the Council to see, what is really happening in the camps filled with starving refugees, where people are under the U.N.'s responsibility. These people are barely getting the minimum daily calorie intake. They are on starvation rations," said Bengoa. To sum up, "this is a case of United Nations responsibility," and the U.N. must issue an urgent call to its member countries, he stressed.

Another aspect of the crisis highlighted by Bengoa is the link with broader development issues, like the consequences of the absence of development programmes in east Africa and the lack of international aid and cooperation. "All these issues are exhaustively discussed in theory here at the international forums, but in reality, they are not put into practice," he said.

The only realistic plan in this context, which would be a real success if achieved, "is an urgent meeting of the Human Rights Council where rich countries make a commitment, at least by expressing willingness to donate, or participate with the intent to contribute, and some may even name a figure for that contribution," the expert said.

"One can allege that such commitments will not be fulfilled either, but at least they will be recorded on paper. France's silos are full; it's not as if Europe had no food to send to Africa," Bengoa said.

The March 2006 U.N. General Assembly resolution that created the Human Rights Council, which replaced the former Commission on Human Rights, stipulates that if 17 states request a special meeting of the

Council on a current, serious and immediate problem involving human rights violations, the Council must convene the extraordinary meeting.

Right now, "the right to food of 12 million people in five countries is being breached," Ziegler said, so Bengoa's proposal "is absolutely in accordance with the Council's mandate," he said.

Ziegler pointed out that none of the five affected countries have a stock of food reserves, because the drought has dragged on for five years, with harvests diminishing gradually to vanishing point. This shows that the present situation could have been foreseen, he said. "They have no food reserves because food commodity prices have soared due to speculation, because hedge fund capital has flown from financial markets that were making big losses, into agricultural commodity exchanges," he said.

When countries cannot afford to stockpile emergency food reserves because of high prices, people's right to food is negated, the expert said. "So, speculation with the prices of basic foods - rice, maize and wheat, which provide 75 percent of normal consumption - should be banned," he said.

Ziegler put forward his interpretation of some recent episodes on the international financial market related to the present crisis in the Horn of Africa.

Greece was recently granted a 157 billion dollar financial bailout, he noted – money that was sent to Greece so it could pay Western banks what they were owed. Meanwhile, at a conference in Nairobi, the WFP asked for 4.2 billion dollars for the period Jul. 15 to Aug. 15, and only secured one-third of this amount.

Germany, Italy, Spain and other European countries can forward billions of euros to their banks, Ziegler continued, yet the same countries have slashed their WFP contributions since October 2008.

To restore the right to food, stock market speculation on staple foods must be banned, states must be obliged to honour their statutory obligations under the convention establishing the WFP, and the debt of countries most affected by the present famine must be drastically reduced, Ziegler said.

FIVE) – ZAMBIA: OUTLOOK DIM FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES

Although there is a female presidential candidate contesting Zambia's Sept. 20 general elections, her prospects are not strong. And in fact, fewer women overall are likely to be elected into public office this year, analysts say. Zambia is a signatory of the Southern Africa Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development, which commits member countries to have 50/50 representation of women in all decision-making positions, including the political arena, by 2015. But the Zambia's political parties have not reflected this in their adoption of female candidates.

Only the Forum for Democratic Development (FDD) nominated a woman, Edith Nawakwi, to contest the presidential race. She is the only woman out of the 15 presidential candidates.

In the last parliament, there were 22 women out of 158 members in the National Assembly, accounting for a 14 percent female representation.

The ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) was the first to publish its list of parliamentary candidates on Jul. 20, and it only had 19 women out of 150 candidates.

The main opposition parties, the Patriotic Front and the United Party for National Development, are yet to publish their lists, but women's rights activists feel there will not be much of a difference.

Emily Sikazwe, the executive director of Women for Change, a non-governmental organisation that advocates for the economic and political empowerment of women, told IPS that this year the prospects for women being elected look bleak. "Already, all the political parties have adopted few women," Sikazwe said. In September, Zambia will hold tripartite elections to choose a president, 150 members of parliament and councillors.

When the registration for presidential election candidates opened on Aug. 7, scores of women turned up at the Supreme Court, the venue for the nominations. These women were from different walks of life, but they had one common purpose: to cheer on FDD's party president, Nawakwi - who is the only female presidential candidate.

Among those who came to offer solidarity to Nawakwi was women's rights activist Beatrice Grillo, the chairperson of the Non-Governmental Organisations Coordinating Council (NGOCC), an umbrella body for women's organisations.

"We have been looking forward to this occasion. We will support her not because she belongs to any party, but because she is a woman. We want to see an end to the poverty that is in this country. We want the women of Zambia to stop struggling. Those are the issues we are looking for and that is what she has promised," told Grillo.

Grillo was adamantly confident that Nawakwi and other women contesting various positions in the elections

would perform well. She said the NGOCC has even come up with an election fund to support women who will be running. The fund will support female candidates in acquiring campaign material. The candidates will, however, not be given cash. "We have campaign teams that will be going out to campaign for all women from all political parties," said Grillo. But not all women share Grillo's excitement about Nawakwi's presidential candidacy. Some feel the struggle for women's representation has been lost before it has even started.

Although the exact figures have not yet been compiled following delays by some of the parties to announce their final lists of candidates, a number of sitting female MPs were dropped and replaced with either male or female candidates.

In Zambia, political parties do not conduct primary elections to choose candidates for parliamentary elections. That task falls to the national executive committees of the parties, which are male-dominated. "Some women who were in the previous parliament worked hard in their constituencies, but they were replaced. This presents a challenge for us having to (work) with new people over and over again," Sikazwe said.

Even Nawakwi's nomination has not really inspired Sikazwe. "Symbolically, yes, we say we are happy she is filing. But we know she is not winning. There is currently a lot of hate language and this does not inspire women to participate," added Sikazwe.

But as Nawakwi said in an interview immediately after filing her nomination that she was in the race to win it. "Nothing and no one will stop me now," said Nawakwi. "I believe that Zambia will only be saved by a woman and that Zambia is ready for a woman president. As soon as the men heard I was contesting, they all panicked. I will work and deliver like I delivered when I was minister of finance."

With slightly over one month left before the elections, Sikazwe said it only makes sense now for the women's movement to start preparing for the next elections in 2016.

"We cannot resolve that (under-representation of women) now, but it is a challenge for us to start working and make sure that come 2016, we will be ready. In the next five years we will have to work hard in addressing these issues. Watch us after five years."

Sikazwe said in a number of cases, political parties were also causing unnecessary tension among women by replacing experienced female candidates with inexperienced ones.

In her view, this is one of the many schemes by men to cause confusion among women.

"This is how men make women fight, replacing females with females," said Sikazwe. "This is a bitter lesson for us as women. A lot of women gave themselves to (their) political parties, but they have been slapped in the face."

In July, the former gender minister and member of parliament Sara Sayifwanda said women were to blame for their poor representation as candidates because they only contested posts in a few constituencies in the country. She told reporters that women ended up competing for only a few available seats.

SIX) – KENYA: POST ELECTION VIOLENCE VICTIMS STILL SUFFER

The Mawingu camp for internally displaced persons affected by Kenya's 2007- 2008 post-election violence is a desolate place. Located in the Rift Valley, the camp is a collection of tattered, sagging and forlorn tents. Save for the 120 children crammed in a room shouting in unison during an English lesson, there is no other sign of life. Many of those who live here left early in the morning to look for menial jobs. If they are lucky they will earn Shs 100 (one dollar) for a day's work.

In the middle of the haphazardly erected tents that provide shelter from the vagaries of the weather stands a frayed, faded tent.

Initially there is a deafening silence. But then Truphosa Achudo, the owner of the tent, emerges with her hands on the scarf wrapped around her head. "I have just taken my drugs, they are strong and I am weak, which is why I am breathing heavily," says Achudo.

Achudo is HIV-positive and she has a two-week-old baby girl, Philomena Wambui. She does not know her daughter's HIV status.

But unlike other lactating mothers, Achudo is not eating fruits and vegetables or even drinking milk to aid with her milk supply. She cannot afford these luxuries. Instead her diet consists of only starchy maize and maize flour, which are donated by government every few months.

When the supply runs out, Achudo's husband, Samwel Njau, has to find casual work in order to buy them food. Njau, whom she tells is suffering from severe flu, left at 7am to look for casual work.

But her family is not the only one having a hard time. The living conditions in the camp are deplorable and are taking a toll on HIV-positive people. Food and financial insecurity is rampant; most here only get one

meal a day as they rely on government's relief supply, which comes once every several months. There are 2,300 people in this camp, both children and adults. Many of those who live here were informal traders before the 2007-2008 violence and many did not have their own homes. Instead they lived in rented houses and they have not returned because they still fear recurrent violence. Violence erupted in the country after incumbent President Mwai Kibaki was declared the winner of the presidential election. At the peak of the violence, the United Nations Secretary General's representative on IDPs estimated that there were between 350,000 and 500,000 internally displaced persons. While government has managed to relocate many IDPs, it has had a problem finding suitable land on which to resettle this community. Also, many have resisted attempts by government to resettle them on arid and semi-arid land.

Achudo's predicament encapsulates the desperate situation characterising life in the camp for HIV-positive people. She was diagnosed with the virus in 2007 and immediately started taking anti-retrovirals (ARVs). She is still on ARVs and, like other HIV-positive people in the camp, she gets the treatment for free at the nearby Olkalou District Hospital.

Achudo also has a persistent dry cough. After visiting the Olkalou District Hospital, she was given drugs to treat it. It brings her daily regime of pills to 24 tablets a day. "The drugs are strong, I should be eating well for them to work in the body, but there is no food," she says.

She coughs through the night and she can only pray that it is not a relapse of tuberculosis, which she suffered from early this year. It is an opportunistic disease that affects many HIV/AIDS patients in the camp. She has found some solace in her condition by becoming a member of the camp's HIV support group Tumaini, which means hope. But general despondency prevails in the camp and among members of the group.

The few toilets in the camp are a health hazard as they are full and overflow with human waste. When it rains at night the tents get soaked, offering little protection to those inside. And hygiene is an issue. The HIV-positive women cannot afford sanitary towels, for instance.

But all is not hopeless. The group is chaired by the strong and outspoken Margaret Gathoni who says "the members have refused to die." "We have been denied casual work out there with some employers saying we shall infect their workers and friends. Our colleagues in the camp whisper negatively as we pass by, (the) majority of us are widows and we feel vulnerable," says Gathoni.

Stigma has been a major concern in Kenya for people living with HIV, but this group has decided to be open about their status.

Out of the 45 people in the group there are only two men. The youngest in the group is a 17-year-old girl, while the oldest is a 60-year-old.

"There are up to 250 HIV-positive people in this camp. (The) women have tried to come out and accept their condition but men have shied away and kept secret their (status), though we know them, we even meet with them at the hospital," says Gathoni.

But Francis Wanderi is one man who has come out and accepted his condition. He says acceptance is equal to prolonging one's life.

Until a home can be found for those living in the camp, the HIV-positive group has banded together to support each other through their challenge.

SEVEN) – IS KENYA STARING AT ECONOMIC RECESSION?

There are telltale signs that the economy could be slipping into a slowdown at best or a recession at worst, as a several economic shocks badly batter the water points of the economy. Kenya's economic trouble that began six months ago has entered a new, far more serious phase. Lingering hopes that the damage could be contained have evaporated after this week's free fall of the shilling that hit a record low of Sh95 to the dollar.

On the other economic fronts, all signs point to the country slipping towards a recession, with all indicators, from macro-economic stability, inflation, interest rates to foreign exchange reserves moving downhill. On the political front, things are not in good shape either, as the country approaches an election year that has the potential to disrupt the little confidence that is still remaining.

There's also a growing sense of wariness about the health of the country's trading partners – Europe, the US, and neighbouring East Africa States. While the outlined are the realities, today, the country is grappling with biting drought, food shortage, high cost of fuel, rising inflation that has climbed to 15.3 per

cent, rising interest rates, a weak shilling, bear stock market, rising unemployment, depreciating foreign reserves, and runaway cost of living. "These factors might well prove the straw that breaks the camel's back. The economy feels as if it is in the rumble in the jungle and has just gone the first five rounds with George Foreman," said Aly-khan Satchu an investment analyst. "Clearly, we are going to see GDP take a hit. Estimates have been ranging from 5.3 per cent to 5.7 per cent, but I think those are very rose-tinted now. The inflationary burst we have witnessed will surely accelerate."

Hostile environment

With analysts down grading the Government's 5.4 per cent GDP forecast, citing that this target will be beyond the Treasury's reach, given the prevailing hostile economic environment, all appear gloomy. Many now see the economy resembling a patient in intensive care and the illness seems to be overwhelming the self-healing tendencies of markets. Millions are at the risk of starvation.

Power bills are up, the level of activity at the Nairobi Stock Exchange has nosedived, cost of food has skyrocketed through the roof and the value of the shilling has depreciated to a record new low – all in three months. In addition, the cost of fuel, which drives almost all sectors of the economy has also risen. Banks have also revised upwards their interest rates despite signals from the market regulator, the Central Bank to the contrary.

Those who study the economy closely say that we may well be headed into a recession – or at least a slowdown in economic growth – given the downward trend of key indicators. The cost of electricity has risen to a 14 month-high as from May due to increased use of expensive diesel-driven power generators, further fuelling inflation. This follows the recent adjustment of the fuel cost component – a cost item on the bills linked to the amount of electricity generated from fuel – that has increased from Sh5.73 to Sh6.15, the highest level since April last year. The adjustment has not gone down well with manufacturers who have expressed concern that Kenya's market is uncompetitive and that some of them were considering relocating. In the end, the manufacturers say, it is the consumer who will pay the rise in cost through price adjustments.

According to statistics, Kenya's economy expanded by 4.9 per cent in the first quarter of the year, helped by improved productivity in the construction, financial services, transport and communication sectors. And that is as far as the good news goes. Analysts are now warning that a surge in inflation and acute shortage of food since April could hurt growth in the second, third and fourth quarters of the economy impacting negatively on overall output by year end.

Year-on-year inflation rate has risen for the ninth month in a row to hit the 15.53 per cent last month, from 14.49 per cent in June. This is against the target of five per cent that is set by CBK for optimum economic growth.

Economists say that persistent rise in inflation ultimately leads to a rise in interest rates – the cost of borrowing for the sake of investment or otherwise – leading to a reduced number of new investment start-ups and overly a dim in the economic growth prospects. Already, most banks have increased their interest rates by between 1.5 per cent and two per cent. They cite rising inflation and other economic realities. "Inflation is like a virus. What is happening is not business as usual," said Adan Mohamed, managing director for Barclays in East and West Africa, while announcing the bank's financial results recently. "If somebody has to make a choice between putting food on the table or paying a bank loan, I think the decision will be very clear."

As financial institutions increase the cost of borrowing, there is concern that the emerging development is bound to stifle economic growth by strangling new investments. Then there is the other factor – level of activity at the stock market. In the recent past, Nairobi Stock Exchange has been on a nosedive.

Save for Wednesday last week when the selloffs at the Nairobi Stock Exchange (NSE) was triggered by uncertainty in the global financial markets, the recent trend indicate subdued activity. Since the controversial downgrading of the US credit rating, local investors are estimated to have lost about Sh64.89 billion. All indications point to the NSE 20 share index hitting 3,500-mark as foreign investors liquidate assets in emerging and frontier market positions, pushing indices in these markets lower. "We expect the index to drop further due to global debt and recessionary fears," said NIC Securities in its research note.

But even with the trends depicting the patterns, in the strictest of senses, various economists struggle with the definition of a recession, hence the problem with its diagnosis and cure. These developments are on the backdrop of coming elections. Kenya always slips into recession around elections. "Political risk and the electoral cycle has had an outside impact on the economy. In 1992 and 1997, the economy was blindsided before the election. In 2007-2008 the economy was blindsided after the actual election," explained Satchu. "Our fumbling puts 2012 on centre of the radar screen." Others, however, disagree.

"Economic fundamentals are still sound as judged by second quarter result postings from financial institutions," said Ken Kaniu, a senior investment manager at Stanbic Investment Management Services. "In my view we are not in and possibly not headed into a recession."

Is Kenya on the brink of an economic slowdown or worse still a recession? (The Standard)

EIGHT) – SWAZILAND: IMPOSSIBLE FOR CHILDREN TO ACCESS PUBLIC INFORMATION

Many public officials in Swaziland do not think that access to information is a public right, but rather a privilege – which can be withdrawn at anytime. And while it is difficult for ordinary citizens to get information from public officials, it is almost impossible for children to be taken seriously.

Nothile Dlamini, 16, found this out first hand when she participated in the Right to Know, Right to Education project, whose focus is on budgets, child rights and education and the concept that access to education and information are inextricably linked. As part of the project Dlamini was one of seven people who had to seek public information from various government institutions in order to assess the response public officials give to different people. The project was carried out by Save the Children-Swaziland in collaboration with the Department of International Development (DfID). "I realised that for someone to get information in the country it depends a lot on who you are," said Nothile Dlamini.

She said most government officials, especially at national level, did not even want to hear her out because they only saw her as a child who was wasting their time. Not only did some officials refuse to give her an ear, they were also rude to the point where she nearly broke down and cried.

The study found that only 27 percent of public officials were willing to give out information.

Save the Children legal advisor, Jackson Rodgers, said while it is difficult for many people to access information, it gets worse for children.

This is particularly relevant in a country where 26 percent of the reproductive age group between 15 and 49 years old is infected with the virus that causes AIDS. And where, according to UNICEF, the United Nation's children's fund, about 70,000 children have been orphaned from HIV, and the number of child-headed households is high. "Access to information among children is particularly relevant for child-headed households because these are children who have the responsibility of taking decisions that affect their families," said Rodgers.

Public institutions in the southern African kingdom denied citizens access by saying the information requested related to issues of national security, privacy, commercial secrets, public safety and effectiveness and integrity of government decision-making.

Rodgers said access to information may be granted in accordance with Section 14 of the constitution under the freedom of expression and association clause, but it is not clear whether it is guaranteed.

And the public has no external body to which to appeal if it feels a public official has unfairly refused to share information.

The participants of the study were a trade unionist, a person working for a non-governmental organisation, student Nothile Dlamini, a school committee member, a person living with disabilities, a journalist and a parent.

Launched in September 2010, the study took place over five months and all seven participants had to visit the same public institutions at different times, requiring access to public information.

The exercise revealed the different attitudes civil servants display to members of the public when seeking information.

According to Save the Children monitoring and evaluation officer, Nomfundo Dlamini, participants who produced requests for information on letter heads got better attention compared to their ordinary counterparts like Nothile Dlamini, the person living with a disability and the parent. "Public institutions claim that they give information to people they can trace and that's why they would rather deal with organisations and not individuals," said Nomfundo Dlamini.

However, smaller institutions such as schools are more accessible compared to national public organisations such as the Regional Education Office. In fact, some regional and national institutions

refused to accept letters requesting information. "Getting appointments with relevant officials to (get) reasons for refusals proved to be difficult," said Nomfundo Dlamini.

Swaziland is among six countries in Africa to take part in the Right to Know, Right to Education project. The other countries are Ghana, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia.

According to Save the Children-Swaziland director, Dumisani Mnisi, this project is aimed at promoting the participation of ordinary people, especially women and children, in the education sector.

Information, said Mnisi, is one of the most important tools citizens need to make informed decisions, especially ones that affect the education system of the country. He said the project will help build capacity for ordinary citizens to see how they can have an impact on the education of their children through participating in decision making from schools to national level. With government already rolling out the Free Primary Education Programme since 2009, reasoned Mnisi, ordinary people need to be more informed so they can decide on the kind of education the country needs.

Access to information has also been proven to be an anticorruption tool, said Mnisi. Swaziland scored poorly in the 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index, drawn up by global watchdog Transparency International, ranking 91 out of 178 countries. Minister of Finance Majozi Sithole has repeatedly told the nation that Swaziland loses 11.5 million dollars a month because of corruption. "Governments do not function well in secret," said Mnisi.

Getting information is also very difficult even for journalists whose jobs depend on the right to know, said Swazi Observer senior reporter, Fanyana Mabuza, who also participated in the study. "I realised that there is no policy addressing access to information (from) government," said Mabuza. "It just depends on the discretion of each public official."

There is a general fear in the country when it comes to giving out information, said Thembinkosi Dlamini, an economist at the Institute of Democracy in Africa (IDASA). "What are you going to do with the information?" was the most common question from public officials, said Save the Children's Nomfundo Dlamini.

Officials were comfortable giving out basic information, such as the number of pupils at school, but were reluctant to cooperate when quizzed on sensitive issues like audited financial statements. "School principals would refuse to give financial statements saying it is only the principal secretary at the Ministry of Education who can request that information," said Nomfundo Dlamini.

However, said Nomfundo Dlamini, no legislation or policy prohibits the public from getting school records. "If you're dealing with the education sector, you're told to appeal (to) the Education Ministry, which makes it difficult to get any redress," said Rogers.

However, said Rogers, the Education Sector Policy, 2011 is a huge step in the right direction in ensuring that schools and institutional information is shared. The policy compels schools to compile information and data and avail it to the public to help guide the education sector at all levels. "The challenge would be the implementation of the policy because it can only be effective only when followed," said Rogers.

NINE) – AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK WITH U.S. \$400 MILLION FOR INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS IN ANGOLA

The African Development Bank (BAD) has set aside about U.S.\$400 million to fund infrastructure projects and promotion of the country's private sector. This was said Wednesday in Luanda by BAD representative, Septime Martin. Septime Martin was speaking at the end of an audience granted to him by Angolan Foreign minister, Georges Chikoti. He added that the application of those resources would depend on Angola's needs and the results of feasibility studies.

BAD representative also said that his institution has funded projects estimated at Usd 60million in a range of fields that include artisan fishing, agriculture, environment and capacity building in terms of governance, together with the ministries of Finance and Planning. According to him, this shows that his institution has been active in Angola.

He said as well that the fact that the bank has opened an office in Angola is also a strong signal of its intention of standing closer to the country and reinforce its cooperation with Angola, thus helping the country to play its role in the region.

On the other hand, the official recalled that the creation of permanent jobs requires the development of small and medium size businesses. "Our goal is to create a favourable environment for promotion of the

private sector and access to credit so that these companies can compete with others," he stated. (Angola Press Agency).

TEN) – DR-CONGO: WIDESPREAD IMPUNITY UNDERMINES UPCOMING POLLS

Controversy over its electoral process has dominated headlines on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the months preceding highly anticipated polls, but an international human rights group shifted the world's attention to another, not unrelated problem Wednesday - the country's feeble judicial system. A report released by Amnesty International Wednesday detailed the prevailing impunity of crimes under international law committed by the Congolese army and other armed groups, notably in eastern DRC. "The people of the DRC have suffered war crimes and crimes against humanity, including torture, sexual violence and the use of child soldiers, on an enormous scale and yet only a handful of perpetrators have ever been brought to justice," said Veronique Aubert, Amnesty International's Africa deputy director. The rights group said that few people have access to existing justice mechanisms, victims and witnesses are reluctant to come forward because there is no national system to protect them, legal aid services - though guaranteed by law - are scarce, and outreach efforts are inadequate.

Moreover, the judiciary is far from independent, with the political and military hierarchy protecting military figures in the military justice system, the report continued - a particular concern in a country where the army is one of the main perpetrators of crimes.

Even where prosecutions are successful "enforcement of court judgments is rare... [and] prison escapes and extractions (assisted escapes) are common," the report added. Amnesty was unable to find one case where a victim was paid compensation.

But a fair trial and due process cannot be guaranteed when judges and other judicial staff regularly face threats and interference from political authorities and military officials, the report noted.

The rights group added that the fight against impunity must be a priority as the scheduled November 2011 presidential elections approach. "The neglected victims of these terrible crimes need justice – they must be able to contribute to the reform process in a meaningful way and have their voices heard by the government," said Aubert.

Whether or not the elections will provide an answer to the ongoing violence and impunity in the Congo is questionable. As the electoral process forges on, fears linger that disputes over the vote's results could disintegrate into further violence.

U.S. Ambassador to the DRC James Entwistle said that the credibility of the elections will be a decisive factor in mitigating that potential. "Credible elections mean, first and foremost, transparency," Entwistle said at a panel hosted by the Woodrow Wilson Center here on Tuesday. "It means an environment in which candidates can campaign and voters can vote, votes are collected and tallied and announced in an open and transparent process...candidates can travel and not be hassled or intimidated."

Almani Cyllah, Africa regional director at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, added that the stakes are heightened by the potential for a spillover to the whole Great Lakes region should violence erupt in the Congo. "The implications for the destabilisation of the political process will obviously destabilise the country," Cyllah said, "but also it would destabilise the Great Lakes region. We have seen that happen in other parts of Africa."

Concerns that the voter registration process was poorly managed have already led to calls for more international monitoring to ensure that problems don't carry over to the ballot box.

Meanwhile, Entwistle, who maintained that the disputed disorganisation of the voter registration process was due to "physical and logistical challenges", called the final list of an estimated 31 million eligible Congolese voters "a significant accomplishment" and maintained a "generally positive take" on the success of U.S. efforts to train and equip Congolese observers throughout the country. "I think it's going very well," Entwistle said Tuesday.

Other regional experts are less at ease with the integrity of election preparations.

"There are all kinds of things that have already stopped the elections from being free and fair," told Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, a Congolese professor at University of North Carolina. "The registration process was extremely flawed...so it is not possible for the elections to be free and fair." Nzongola-Ntalaja cited images of 10 and 11-year-olds registering to vote, accounts of people with multiple cards and registering several times, and complaints from the ground that centre placements are plotted in locations favourable to the current president while people living in areas concentrated with opposition support have been forced to walk miles to the nearest centre.

The new independent electoral commission (CENI) blamed its low budget. Meanwhile, the parliament's decision to reduce the voting process in the presidential ballot from two rounds to one - a move likely to favour the incumbent president - caused further alarm, while being defended by President Joseph Kabila of the ruling party as an economic decision.

Nzongola-Ntalaja called the financial excuses "utter nonsense". "Kabila's government delayed setting up the electoral commission. It delayed the registration process. It changed the constitution five months before the vote. All of these are costly delays that should have been prevented," he said. "And all of these decisions are political."

Kabila came to power in 2006 in the country's first multi-party elections in 40 years, which passed off relatively smoothly thanks to extensive international monitoring and financial aid.

While Amnesty contended that the government's prioritisation of a comprehensive justice strategy was made urgent by the timeliness of the upcoming elections, Nzongola-Ntalaja told that violence and impunity were not to be blamed for the electoral flaws, but rather, should be attributed to them.

"The failure of free and fair elections will not be because of the insecurity or violence in different parts of the country," he said. "It is the government - the manipulation of the people in power, to stay in power - that is what's messing everything up."

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Brussels

