

BUNGE LA MWANANCHI FREEDOM FROM HUNGER

In 1978 when Mzee Kenyatta died, the cost of a 2kg packet of maize flour was Kshs 2.80. On December 27, 2002 maize flour cost was Kshs 27. During 24 years of Moi's rule, the price of Unga had increased by Kshs 24, an average of 1 shilling per year. In 2003 the cost of Unga increased to Kshs. 54; it doubled. In only 1 year the Narc government had increased the price of Unga by Kshs. 27, more than Moi's government had increased in 24 years. On December 27, 2002, one kilo of sugar cost 27 Kshs, today a kilo of sugar costs 85 Kshs. When Narc assumed office a litre of paraffin cost 22 Kshs, today it costs 60 Kshs. Under the Narc government the cost of transport doubled. In fact, the cost of all basic products has risen by over 100%.

As a result, we the ordinary citizens continue to struggle just to survive from one day to the other. We welcome free primary education; our children are not required to pay school fees. However, with the rising cost of food, children either go to school hungry, or even stay at home. The reason is simple- food is too expensive. In fact, during the Moi era many of us were able to afford both fees and food. Today most of us cannot afford food, even though we are not paying fees.

It is true that the Narc government has made improvements. Farmers are being paid for their produce. Coffee, sugar, tea, milk, maize and many products are better paid today than during the Moi era. Why, then, does the Kenyan farmer continue to struggle? Because the cost of all farm inputs- seeds, fertilizers, insecticides, herbicides- have doubled or tripled. The money the farmers are getting is quickly taken back through these exorbitant prices.

Today 3 out of 5 Kenyans are either starving or on the brink of starvation. In a nation of 30 million, that means 18 million Kenyans cannot afford to feed themselves every day. Many of us live on one meal a day, and on some days that meal is not available and our hungry children cry until they sleep.

Is it because we do not work? Ordinary Kenyans work every day. We till the land, work in factories, flower farms and EPZ. We dig ditches, chip and carry stones from quarries, hawk products on the streets, run kiosks. Most of us are casual labourers, cleaning homes for the rich, doing clerical work in their companies, mixing concrete in their construction. The average casual labourer is paid only 100 Kshs per day to do extremely hard work. 100 Kshs is no longer enough to buy food for a family; unga is 54 Kshs. Paraffin, sukuma wiki, cooking oil, water and rent are supposed to come from the remaining 46 Kshs. That is why we are sleeping with empty stomachs even after working hard.

Where are our MPs?

Since independence Kenya has never missed a scheduled election. Every 5 years ordinary citizens elect MPs. Their only job is to give voice to the people's needs. Why are they so quiet when food prices increase?

During the Kenyatta and Moi era, like ordinary Kenyans, MPs' salary was less than 20,000 Kshs. Some MPs were rich, but many were ordinary citizens who understood the struggles of ordinary citizens. Today an MP earns over Kshs. 600,000 every month. Each month an MP can afford to buy over 10,000 packets of unga, enough to feed his family for 30 years! That is

why MPs say nothing about the high cost of food. And, this includes all our MPs, not just government MPs. When it comes to voting for their needs, there is usually no difference between our MPs.

Why are Kenyans unable to afford food?

Every year starving Kenyans are given dry maize because they have no food. The government blames this on lack of rain. It is true that it has not rained in some areas for a long time. But it is also true that year round Kenya exports vegetables like French beans to Europe. Kenya is the top exporter of flowers in the world. If there is enough water to irrigate flowers and French beans for Europeans, why not use the same water to grow food for Kenyans?

Because the government does not care whether Kenyans live or die. Kenyans are paid very little salaries for making products that earn billions for foreigners. The government has poor planning leading to poor policies which have contributed to joblessness; poor remuneration; mismanagement of national resources like water (e.g. a government water project delivers water to a minister's farm in Kajiado, leaving the rest of the district dry); unexploited talent (educated and trained Kenyans are either unemployed or retrenched); high taxation of citizens (foreigners who invest in Kenya don't pay taxes for 10 years while citizens are taxed heavily from the first day); bad politics (If MPs can spend heavily for referendum campaigns why not use the same energy to help starving Kenyans?); improper, imbalanced education due to poor education policy (the rich have well equipped private schools, the poor learn under trees); lack of research on food; etc

The most serious reason, however, is the inequitable distribution of resources. The gap between the richest and the poorest people in Kenya is the second highest in the world; we are a nation of a few billionaires and 30 million beggars. 75% of our resources, including land, are controlled by foreigners. As a result, we remain essentially enslaved, nearly all of us work for foreign interests.

At the same time, 90 % of all income generated in Kenya is owned by only 10%, meaning that 27 million Kenyans have to fight for only 10% of the income.

Sadly, there is no truly selfless leader in Kenya. Poor leadership means that people with selfless nationalism like JM Kariuki are quickly killed, leaving us with selfish and corrupt leaders.

Can food be made affordable?

The government can easily ensure that no Kenyan will ever go hungry. First, foreigners can be taxed and a fund created that would provide Kenyan farmers with interest-free loans. Money leaving the country should be limited so that money earned in Kenya develops Kenya. Also, money coming to Kenya should not be scrutinized so that, like Switzerland, Kenya benefits from foreign funds. We can use existing resources like the military and the National Youth Service to drill boreholes, make water furrows, construct water reservoirs to harvest rainwater, improve roads and distribute food. Drilling boreholes makes more sense than constructing dams which are dependent on rains. Education can be improved so that Kenyans are given appropriate training (e.g. teach carpentry, brick making, etc to all Kenyans, not just prisoners). Kenyans can be encouraged to grow indigenous crops by having an extra tax imposed on all foreign food imports. Kenyans should be allowed to transport food freely from any part of the country without requiring licenses or paying any fees.

Like other countries, the government must be forced to subsidize the cost of basic food products. If we go by the history of the Moi era, the cost of Unga should increase by 1 Kshs each year. Since in 2002 it was 27 Kshs the cost of Unga should not exceed 30 Kshs. At the same time, the government should subsidize the cost of Kerosene/paraffin which ordinary citizens use.

Bunge la Mwananchi believes that there is enough money for the government of Kenya to subsidize Unga and paraffin. By removing taxes on Unga and paraffin, the prices should drop. Further, the government should find money to subsidize basic food products. Kenyans need affordable food, NOT relief food. Queuing for dry maize with our children undermines our dignity and is not a sustainable solution. If food prices are reduced, no Kenyan will go hungry. We are willing to work for our food, as long as the prices are affordable.

Where will the money come from?

The government has plenty of money, it just misuses it. We demand that the salaries of MPs are reduced to no more than 200,000 per month, and like everyone else, the MPs should pay taxes and contribute to the national pension schemes of NSSF and PAYE. Pension scheme for MPs and health insurance to private hospitals should be scrapped; MPs should have NHIF insurance and go to government hospitals like other Kenyans. The over 1 billion set aside in the budget for renovating MPs offices and enlarging parliament should be used to subsidize food or establish a fund for capital investment in small businesses for Kenyans. That will generate income and provide employment. The 100million budgeted for building the VP's house and the 400 million for renovating State house should be used for building low cost houses for Kenyans. Like Rwanda, Kenya should sell all expensive government vehicles and replace them with simple vehicles, which should only be used during government business and not for taking Ministers' girlfriends shopping. The President, if he is serious about reducing expenses in government, should start by firing all cabinet ministers who have refused to give back the extra cars. No public officer should ever have more than one vehicle assigned to him. The money saved can be used to improve transport for ordinary Kenyans. All presidential commissions should be immediately abolished; they consume billions and deliver nothing. Spending 300 million on Mutava Musyimi's commission or paying Ringera 2.5 million per month to fight corruption is, itself, corruption. That money can be used better. Alfred Mutua should be sacked. Kenya has no need for a spokesman telling us about homesick hyenas in Thailand at a cost of 1.5 million per month. Retreats for MPs should be banned; meetings should be in Parliament not in 5-star hotels in Mombasa. Funding for MPs offices in their constituencies should be scrapped, those offices can be run by volunteers at no cost. Pension for retired presidents should be no more than 300,000. Imports of locally available products should be heavily taxed. No public funds should ever be used to fund funerals or help individual families unless similar privileges are extended to all Kenyans.