

Good News about the Economy in Africa, but Poverty Continues

One expert claims the truth is often hidden in misleading information

Hello again, and welcome to *As It Is*, VOA's daily magazine show for people learning American English.

I'm Christopher Cruise.

Today on the program, we report on the fight against illegal logging operations in West and Central Africa...

"The systemic nature of them in the other countries, if not controlled, could lead to similar destruction."

And we go back 86 years to the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic Ocean...

"Nations and races are not separated by the traditional obstacles of earthbound travel."

But first, why do so many people in Africa still live in poverty after years of reports about the area's growing economy?

Good Government Economic Reports, But Persistent Poverty

Official economic reports often show progress in Africa's economic development. But many people on the continent continue to live in poverty. VOA's Peter Heinlein spoke to one economic expert who says the truth about Africa is often hidden in misleading information...

The International Monetary Fund and The Economist magazine say Africa has passed Asia as the fastest-growing continent. They predict that seven of the world's ten fastest-growing economies over the next five years will be in Africa.

Yet many of these countries are among the world's poorest. Why is that?

Morten Jerven is an economic historian at Simon Fraser University in Canada. He believes the numbers being reported are misleading. He says his research shows the numbers often appear to be manipulated, or even made up by governments.

He says government agencies are under pressure to tell their leaders, and possible aid donors, that development programs are working.

"There is one big problem, is that, you know, there is always political pressure. In any statistical office in any country of the world, would know more or less what the number the executive politicals ((politicians)) would like to have."

Morten Jerven says the problem is made worse by large international development agencies that gather the information and then pass it on. He says the involvement of these agencies can often influence people to accept the economic statistics, even when they are misleading.

“There should be clearer descriptions about how unreliable these data are. And we’d like to think that these numbers mean something, but most of the time we are just guessing, and we are, we are very often fooled when we do this.”

He says the statistics are sometimes created for political reasons.

“In Malawi, is an example of that, where every year since they introduced the fertilizer subsidy, every year Malawi could report even higher maize production in the country, to an extent that it became ridiculous, because either Malawians were putting on a lot of weight or Malawians would have to export maize, or the maize production numbers were just simply not true.”

Morten Jerven studied reports from eight African countries. Twenty other countries were included in an email study.

The full study was published in a book called “Poor Numbers: How We are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do About It?”

I’m Peter Heinlein.

Illegal Logging Threatens West and Central Africa

A new report says politically-powerful people, forestry officials and companies are using small-scale permits to ignore rules in West and Central Africa. The report says the use of such permits puts the European Union and the United States at risk of importing illegal timber.

June Simms has the story...

Some countries give small businesses permission to cut trees in community forests. But the environmental group Global Witness says the permits are being used by large companies to cut trees illegally.

The group says logging companies in Liberia recently used “private use permits” in ways they were not supposed to. It says they cut more than 40 percent of the country’s forests during a two-year period. In addition to Liberia, the new Global Witness report examines the use of shadow permits in Ghana, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

David Young works on forestry issues for the group.

“The area involved proportionately in Liberia is much greater than in, than in the other countries. So it was a much bigger threat to Liberia’s forests. But the systemic nature of them in the other countries, if not controlled, could lead to similar destruction.”

Investigations led Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to announce a ban on the permits. She also promised to investigate officials who had approved the questionable uses.

“The good news in, in Liberia is that the president issued an executive decree early in 2013 to completely close down the private use permits. And she has promised criminal investigations and prosecutions where necessary. But that was back in January. We’re now in May and we haven’t seen much progress in that investigation and those prosecutions.”

He says the process of awarding shadow permits remains secret. He says that means abuses can continue. He says the secrecy means that by the time abuses are discovered by non-governmental groups or by reporters, much of the damage has been done.

The European Union Timber Regulation went into effect last month. It bans the trading of illegal timber on European markets. Global Witness urges the EU and the United States to consider any timber logged under shadow permits to be high risk and possibly illegal.

I’m June Simms.

Historic Flight from the United States to Europe

Now, we go back in time 86 years -- to May 20th, 1927. That was the day American pilot Charles Lindbergh left an air field near New York City on the first solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean.

A few friends watched Lindbergh's airplane -- called the "Spirit of Saint Louis" -- lift off from the muddy runway.

Thirty-three hours and 39 minutes later, almost 100,000 people watched him arrive safely at Le Bourget Airport near Paris, France.

Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic excited people around the world. The flight made the once unknown airmail pilot internationally famous. Governments and large companies asked his opinions on the future of aviation. Reporters called him "Lucky Lindy."

In 1930 he spoke to a group of aviation officials.

"Possibly the most important effect [of commercial aviation] will be on international relations. When measured in hours of flying time, the great distances of the Old World no longer exist. Nations and races are not separated by the traditional obstacles of earthbound travel. There are no inland cities of the air, and no natural obstructions to its commerce."

A few years later, Charles Lindbergh became an anti-war activist. Some people accused him of supporting Nazi Germany and of being anti-Semitic and opposing Jews. But during World War Two, as a civilian, he flew battle missions in the Pacific, and shot down several Japanese planes.

After the war, Lindbergh worked for Pan American World Airways. He was also a brigadier general in the United States Air Force Reserve. He died of cancer in 1974 at age 72.

That's *As It Is* for today.

We would like to hear what you want to hear about on *As It Is*. So let us know -- send an email to LearningEnglish@voanews.com

I'm Christopher Cruise, and that's *As It Is* from VOA Learning English on the Voice of America.