FOURTH SESSION OF THE TWELFTH REPUBLICAN PARLIAMENT

EIGHTEENTH

REPORT FROM | THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

EXAMINATION OF | The Reports of the Auditor General on the Financial Statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) for the financial years 2014 to 2021 & Follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Public Accounts Committee's Twenty-Third Report from the Eleventh Parliament.

Office of the Parliament
Parliamentary Complex
Cabildo Building
St. Vincent Street Port of Spain
Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

PARLIAMENT
REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Public Accounts Committee

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) established by the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in accordance with Section 119(4) is mandated to consider and report to the House of Representatives on:

'(a) appropriation accounts of moneys expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago;
(b) such other accounts as may be referred to the Committee by the House of Representatives or as are authorized or required to be considered by the committee under any other enactment; and
(c) the report of the Auditor General on any such accounts.'

Current membership

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo	Chairman
Ms. Jearlean John	Vice- Chairman
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member
Mr. Adrian Leonce	Member
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	Member
Mr. Roger Monroe	Member
Dr. Amery Browne[1]	Member
Mrs. Hazel Thompson-Ahye[2]	Member

Committee Staff

The current staff members serving the Committee are:

Ms. Hema Bhagaloo	Assistant Secretary to the Committee
Mr. Justin Jarrette	Senior Research Specialist
Terniq Roberts-Edwards	Parliamentary Research Specialist
Martha Philibert	Parliamentary Research Specialist
Asha Edmund	Parliamentary Research Specialist
Ms. Natoya O'Neil	Clerk Typist I
Ms. Anesha James	Clerk Typist I

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Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to:
The Secretary
Public Accounts Committee
Parliamentary Complex
Cabildo Building
St Vincent Street, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago
Tel: (868) 624-7275; Fax: (868) 625-4672;
Email: pac@ttparliament.org

[1] Dr. Amery Browne was appointed in lieu of Mr. Randall Mitchell with effect from January 12, 2021.
[2] Mrs. Hazel Thompson-Ahye was appointed in lieu of Ms. Charrise Seepersad with effect from October 24, 2023.

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Members of the Public Accounts Committee

TWELFTH PARLIAMENT, REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo
Chairman

Ms. Jearlean John
Vice- Chairman

Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy
Member

Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon
Member

Mr. Adrian Leonce
Member

Mr. Roger Monroe
Member

Dr. Amery Browne
Member

Mrs. Hazel Thompson-Ahye
Member

Executive Summary

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is the Parliamentary Financial Oversight Committee tasked with the responsibility of examining the Report of the Auditor General and Audited Accounts of Statutory Authorities and Bodies. The Committee presents its Eighteenth Report of the Twelfth Parliament, which details its ***examination of the reports of the Auditor General on the financial statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) for the financial years 2014 to 2021 & Follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Public Accounts Committee's Twenty-Third Report from the Eleventh Parliament.***

This report sets out the issues raised as well as the observations made and recommendations proposed by the Committee.

During this inquiry, the following issues arose:

1. **Status of Outstanding Audited Financial Statements;**
2. **Auditor's Opinions on NAMDEVCO's Financial Statements ;**
3. **Government Subvention;**
4. **Strategic Plan;**
5. **Human Resources;**
6. **Issues with AgriPrice Mobile App;**
7. **Accounts Receivable; and**
8. **Customer Service Issues.**

Based on the Committee's examination, the following observations were made:

i. ***The Committee notes that the absence of recent revaluations of NAMDEVCO's properties does not comply with International Accounting Standards, but understands that the resulting misstatements in the Corporation's financial statements were not made in bad faith, as the issue of property revaluation depends on the issuance of the leases, which is not under NAMDEVCO's control;***

ii. ***The Committee notes that the delay in acquiring the leases for the properties occupied by NAMDEVCO has hindered the Corporation's ability to finalise Public Private Partnership (PPP) arrangements, particularly affecting the potential for enhanced***

operations and local agricultural integration. The Committee notes the benefits to be attained from the completion of the two (2) PPPs which were being prepared, as these would create an additional avenue through which to market products, boost the production of local value-added items and generate employment in specialty areas such as food science and preservation of food as well as nutrition and food security;

iii. *The Committee acknowledges NAMDEVCO's efforts to manage its spending carefully in light of its funding constraints, and to secure other sources of funding. The Committee however, is concerned about the effect of prolonged insufficient funding on the Corporation's ability to fulfil all aspects of its mandate effectively. An example of this is that the lack of funding was cited as a factor hindering the Corporation's efforts to address several of the weaknesses regarding policies and standard operating procedures, identified in the SWOT analysis of its 2019-2021 Strategic Plan;*

i. *The Committee reiterates its concern raised at the public hearing that sole select tendering was used for the 2019-2021 Strategic Plan;*

ii. *The Committee further reiterates its concern that the vast majority of the period 2022-2025 has already elapsed and NAMDEVCO is only now attempting to develop a Strategic Plan for that period. This exercise does not appear to ensure value for money, particularly given its likely cost and how late it is being undertaken;*

iii. *The Committee also strongly encourages NAMDEVCO to begin the development of its Strategic Plan for the relevant strategic period beyond 2025 without delay;*

iv. *The Committee notes, regarding NAMDEVCO's identified opportunity "to guide and support enterprise development" that the mandate of the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) is "to encourage and foster the development of agriculture and commercial fishing and industries connected therewith and to mobilise funds for the purpose of the development", pursuant to section 6 of Agricultural Development Bank Act Chap. 79:07. There is, therefore, potential for fruitful collaboration between these two state agencies;*

v. *The Committee similarly notes, regarding NAMDEVCO's identified export-related opportunities that there is potential for collaboration with the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency – an amalgamation of the existing agencies InvesTT, CreativeTT and – most relevant to this inquiry – exporTT;*

vi. *The Committee notes that, in the SWOT Analysis of its 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, NAMDEVCO identified "deficiencies in critical skill areas" and "inadequate staff*

complement and skill base to effectively and efficiently carry out the Corporation's mandate". The persistence of staffing challenges is therefore even more concerning given that the problem is well understood and documented by the Corporation. The Committee anticipates the filling of all vacant posts through the recruitment drive carded to begin in May 2024;

iv. *The Committee noted that while the present app is unreliable and obsolete, NAMDEVCO aimed to develop a new app and has also updated the NAMIS 4.0 app. Additionally, NAMDEVCO disseminated market information through alternative channels such as Facebook, its websites, and email lists. However, it is noted that these methods may not be as convenient or accessible as a mobile app;*

v. *The Committee noted that NAMDEVCO has indicated that changes to the ICT infrastructure, capabilities, and equipment have changed since the completion of that audit thereby reducing NAMDEVCO's risks;*

vi. *The Committee noted the development of cashless systems by the NAMDEVO to ensure the reduction in theft and misappropriation of funds. However, the Committee remained concerned about the potential for fraud and the effectiveness of these systems in environments where cash is still sometimes used inadvertently or dishonestly; and*

vii. *Despite the shift to cashless systems, the Committee encourages NAMDEVCO to remain vigilant in environments where cash transactions may still occur. Staff should be trained to recognise and prevent fraudulent activities, and regular audits and reviews should be conducted to ensure compliance with cashless policies and address and weaknesses in the systems.*

Based on the Committee's examination the following recommendations were proposed:

i. *NAMDEVCO should provide a status update on the submission of its financial statements for financial year 2023 to the AGD for audit by January 14, 2025.*

ii. *The Commissioner of State Lands (COSL) under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries should provide Parliament with an update on the preparation of the leases for all properties used by NAMDEVCO by January 14, 2025.*

iii. *The MALF should report to Parliament on the result of its review of Draft Estimates submitted by NAMDEVCO for each FY from 2014 to 2021 detailing the difference, if any,*

between the sum initially requested by NAMDEVCO and the sum submitted to the MOF and providing the rationale for the changes made by January 14, 2025.

iv. *NAMDEVCO should submit the following to Parliament regarding its 2022-2025 Strategic Plan by January 14, 2025:*
    a. *a document outlining the steps undertaken to ensure compliance with OPR regulations in the selection of the consultant for the development of the Plan;*
    b. *the anticipated timeline and estimated cost for the development of the Plan.*

v. *The NAMDEVCO should submit to Parliament an update on the status of the development of the 2022-2025 strategic plan and the approaches developed to ensure a more proactive approach to the development of the strategic plans in the future by January 14, 2025;*

vi. *NAMDEVCO should identify the expanded services that it could offer in an attempt to broaden its revenue base and, if feasible, an estimate of the positive effect that these additional services could have on NAMDEVCO's internally generated revenue; and*

vii. *NAMDEVCO should report to Parliament on the following regarding the opportunities identified in its SWOT Analysis by January 14, 2025:*
    a. *the ways in which the Corporation could work with the ADB to promote agricultural enterprise development; and*
    b. *the ways in which the Corporation could work with the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency to boost exports in the agricultural sector.*

viii. *NAMDEVCO should provide the following to Parliament by January 14, 2025:*
    a. *a list of the critical skills which need to be brought into the organisation;*
    b. *a list of the posts filled since the May 01, 2024 public hearing;*
    c. *an explanation of whether the newly recruited staff have fully addressed the Corporation's skills gap.*

ix. *NAMDEVCO should continue its thrust toward app redevelopment addressing the issues experienced in the previous app and report to Parliament by January 14, 2025, on the status of the following:*
    a. *the new mobile app's development;*
    b. *the timeline for the development of the new mobile app as well as the projected cost for development*

c. *the source of funding or whether a grant was accessed; and*
d. *the lessons learnt from the development and launch of the previous mobile app which were applied to the development and launch of the new mobile app.*

x. *NAMDEVCO upon the development of the new mobile app should consider the development of the following and provide to Parliament a status report by January 14, 2025:*

a. *a continuous improvement plan, including regular updates and dedicated technical support, to maintain the app's reliability and relevance; and*
b. *the integration of the app development into NAMDEVCO's broader digital transformation strategy, ensuring it aligns with the organization's goals for data collection, dissemination, and stakeholder engagement ensuring the app's long-term sustainability and impact.*

xi. *NAMDEVCO should submit to Parliament a status report on the development and implementation of staff training protocols, regular audit and reviews of its cash-less system by January 14, 2025.*

xii. *NAMDEVCO should explore alternative debt recovery strategies for small amounts, including the following and submit a update by January 14, 2025 on the strategies which could be developed in this regard:*

a. *offering settlements;*
b. *using automated systems for ongoing reminders and collections;*
c. *utilizing print media or online platforms to publicly list outstanding debts;*
d. *alternative legal and financial strategies to recover statute-barred debts through negotiations or settlements.*

xiii. *MALF should provide Parliament with a status update, by January 14, 2025, on the implementation of ongoing training programs for frontline staff at the regional offices to ensure the provision of accurate and consistent information that aligns with the Ministry's official communications outlining;*

a. *Number of training programmes conducted / planned; and*
b. *Number of employees targeted disaggregated by regional office.*

xiv. *MALF should consider establishing feedback systems to monitor the effectiveness of the training and the accuracy of information provided, allowing for continuous improvement*

in customer service, and report to Parliament on its plans in this regard by January 14, 2025.

Introduction

The PAC of the Twelfth Republican Parliament was established by resolutions of the House of Representatives and the Senate at the sittings held on Monday November 9, 2020 and Tuesday November 17, 2020 respectively.

The Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago mandates that the Committee shall consider and report to the House on appropriation accounts of monies expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago and the report of the Auditor General on any such accounts.

In addition to the Committee's powers entrenched in the Constitution, Standing Orders 111 of the House of Representatives and 101 of the Senate also empower the Committee, inter alia, to:

1. Send for persons, papers and records;
2. Have meetings whether or not the House is sitting;
3. Meet in various locations;
4. Report from time to time; and
5. Communicate with any other Committee on matters of common interest.

Election of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman

In accordance with section 119(2) of the Constitution, the Chairman must be a member of the Opposition in the House. At the first meeting held on Wednesday November 18, 2020 Mr. Davendranath Tancoo was elected Chairman of the Committee and Ms. Jearlean John was elected Vice-Chairman of the Committee.

Establishment of Quorum

The Committee is required by the Standing Orders to have a quorum so that any decisions made by the Members during the meetings can be considered valid. A quorum of three (3) Members, inclusive of the Chair or Vice-Chairman, with representatives from each House was agreed to by the Committee at its First Meeting.

Determination of the Committee's Work Programme

The Committee agreed to a work programme for the Fourth Session of the Twelfth Parliament as follows:

1. The Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2022;
2. The Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2023;
3. The Police Complaints Authority (PCA);
4. The Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago;
5. The Agricultural Development Bank of Trinidad and Tobago (ADB);
6. The Regulated Industries Commission (RIC);
7. The National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO);
8. The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund (HSF);
9. The Land Settlement Agency (LSA);
10. The Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (CARIRI); and
11. The National Lotteries Control Board (NLCB)

The Inquiry Process

The inquiry process outlines steps taken by the PAC in developing the findings and recommendations of its examination of the reports of the Auditor General on the Financial Statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) for the financial years 2014 to 2021 & Follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Public Accounts Committee's Twenty-Third Report from the Eleventh Parliament.

The inquiry process included the following steps:

1. Identified issues in:
    a. the Reports of the Auditor General on the financial statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) for the financial years 2014 to 2021; and
    b. The Ministerial Response from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (MALF) to the 23rd report of the PAC, 11th Parliament, on an examination of the reports of the Auditor General on the financial statements of NAMDEVCO for the financial years 2008 to 2011;

2. Drafted an Inquiry Proposal on the selected issues. The Inquiry Proposal outlines:
    - Background of the entity;
    - Objectives of the inquiry; and
    - Proposed Questions.

3. Questions for written response based on the issues identified in the Financial Statements and in the Ministerial Response were sent to the NAMDEVCO and to the MALF on December 5, 2023. The responses were received on–December 18, 2023 from the NAMDEVCO and on December 19, 2023 from the-MALF;

4. Prepared an Issues Paper which identified and summarised matters of concern in the responses provided by the NAMDEVCO and the MALF;

5. Based on the issues identified, the Committee agreed to have a public hearing;

6. The public hearing was held on May 1, 2024. Representatives of the NAMDEVCO, the MALF, and the Auditor General's Department (AGD) (see Appendix I – Witnesses) attended the hearing to discuss the issues of concern;

7. Questions for additional information based on the issues discussed with at the public hearing were sent to the NAMDEVCO and the MALF on May 6, 2024 (see Appendix II – Minutes). The responses to these questions were received on May 21, 2024 from both entities;

8. Reported the Committee's findings and recommendations to Parliament upon conclusion of the inquiry;

9. The Report will be transmitted to the Ministries, Departments and Agencies to which recommendations were addressed for written response within sixty (60) days in accordance with Standing Order 110(6) of the House of Representatives and 100(6) of the Senate;

10. Subsequent follow-up will be carried out to monitor progress in the implementation of the Committee's recommendations.

Background: The National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation[3]

The National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) is the Statutory Body responsible for the agricultural marketing function. NAMDEVCO was created by Act of Parliament No. 16 of 1991 with a mandate **"to create, facilitate and maintain an environment conducive to the efficient marketing of agricultural produce and food products through the provision of marketing services and the stimulation of business investment in the agro-industrial sector of Trinidad and Tobago."**

In 2005, NAMDEVCO's mandate was revised to include value added product development and marketing of these products.

The core functions of the Corporation are as follows:

- To develop and expand markets, marketing opportunities and agribusiness investments.
- To develop and manage a comprehensive Agricultural Market Information System.
- To develop and expand production and investment in Value Added and Primary Food Products.
- To develop and maintain Market Infrastructure and Systems to facilitate agricultural and food marketing in accordance with global standards.
- To develop and manage a Quality Assurance System aimed at supplying safe and wholesome foods.
- To establish, manage and promote investments in agriculture through commercial ventures and/or a Subsidiary Company.

[3] NAMDEVCO.com. Accessed August 16 2024. Available: https://www.namdevco.com/about_profile

Background: Auditor General's Department

Establishment of the Office of the Auditor General[4]

The Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (Act 4 of 1976) Chapter 8– Section 116 states that:

1) There shall be an Auditor General for Trinidad and Tobago, whose office shall be a public office.
2) The public accounts of Trinidad and Tobago and of all officers, courts and authorities of Trinidad and Tobago shall be audited and reported on annually by the Auditor General, and for that purpose the Auditor General or any person authorized by him in that behalf shall have access to all books, records, returns and other documents relating to those accounts.
3) The Auditor General is hereby empowered to carry out audits of the accounts, balance sheets and other financial statements of all enterprises that are owned or controlled by or on behalf of the State.
4) The Auditor General shall submit his reports annually to the Speaker, the President of the Senate and the Minister of Finance.
5) The President of the Senate and the Speaker shall cause the report to be laid before the Senate and the House of Representatives, respectively, at the next sitting of the Senate and the House of Representatives after the receipt thereof, respectively.
6) In the exercise of his functions under this Constitution, the Auditor General shall not be subject to the direction or control of any other person or authority.

Current Auditor General[5]

2023 - Present Ms. Jaiwantie Ramdass

[4] Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Accessed August 16, 2024: http://laws.gov.tt/pdf/Constitution.pdf
[5] Ibid, *Profile of the Auditor General.* Accessed August 16, 2024: http://www.auditorgeneral.gov.tt/content/profile-auditor-general

Role and Function[6]

The Auditor General is required by law to examine and report annually to Parliament on the accounts of Ministries, Departments, Regional Health Authorities, Regional Corporations and such State Controlled Enterprises and Statutory Boards for which the Auditor General is the statutory auditor. The portfolio also includes the audit of:

- The accounts of projects funded partly or wholly by International Lending Agencies;
- All pensions, gratuities and other separation benefits paid by the State in accordance with the Pensions Acts and other Agreements; and
- The grant of credit on the Exchequer Account in accordance with the requirements of section 18 of the Exchequer and Audit Act, chapter 69:01.

The audit services take the form of financial audits, compliance audits and value for money audits intended to promote:

- Accountability;
- Adherence to laws and regulations; and
- Economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the collection, disbursement and use of funds and other resources.

Duties and Powers of the Auditor General[7]

The duties and powers of the Auditor General are defined in the Exchequer and Audit Act Chapter 69:01 of the laws of Trinidad and Tobago. Part III of the Exchequer and Audit Act specifies these duties listed here under:

1. The Auditor General shall not be capable while holding the said office of holding any other

Office of emolument in the service of the State.

[6] Ibid, *Appointment, Role and Function*. Accessed August 16, 2024: http://www.auditorgeneral.gov.tt/content/appointment-role-and-function

[7] Exchequer and Audit Act Chapter 69:01. Accessed August 16, 2024: http://rgd.legalaffairs.gov.tt/laws2/alphabetical_list/lawspdfs/69.01.pdf

2. (1) Save as is otherwise provided for in the Constitution the provisions of the law and regulations in force relating to the public service shall apply to the Auditor General.
(2) Where the Auditor General is removed from office under the Constitution the Minister shall make a full statement of the reasons therefore at the first opportunity to Parliament.

3. (1) The Auditor General shall examine, inquire into and audit the accounts of all accounting officers and receivers of revenue and all persons entrusted with the assessment of, collection, receipt, custody, issue of payment of public moneys, or with the receipt, custody, issue, sale, transfer or delivery of any stamps, securities, stores or other State property.

4. The Auditor General shall satisfy himself that -

   (1) all reasonable precautions have been taken to safeguard the collection of public moneys and that the laws, directions and instructions relating thereto have been duly observed;

   (2) all issues and payments were made in accordance with proper authority and that all payments were properly chargeable and are supported by sufficient vouchers or proof of payment;

   (3) all money expended has been applied to the purpose or purposes for which the same was granted by Parliament and that such expenditure conforms to the authority which governs it and has been incurred with due regard to the avoidance of waste and extravagance;

   (4) essential records are maintained and the rules and procedures framed and applied are sufficient to safeguard the control of stores and other State property.

Issues and Recommendations

During the Committee's examination of the Reports of the Auditor General on the Financial Statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) for the financial years 2014 to 2021 & Follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Public Accounts Committee's Twenty-Third Report from the Eleventh Parliament, the following issues were identified, observations made and recommendations proposed.

1. Status of Outstanding Audited Financial Statements

According to parliamentary records, the latest Report of the Auditor General on NAMDEVCO's audited financial statements submitted to Parliament was for financial year 2021, which was laid in the House of Representatives and in the Senate on April 21 and March 28, 2023 respectively. In the written submission dated December 18, 2023, as well as at the public hearing held on May 1, 2024, NAMDEVCO confirmed that the audited financial statement for the financial year 2022 had been submitted to the AGD for audit in December 2023.

The Corporation further committed to submitting its financial year 2023 financial statement for audit by the end of May 2024. However, in correspondence dated July 24, an update was provided by the AGD providing an update on the audit of financial statements by entities under the purview of the PAC. It was noted that NAMDEVCO's financial statements for financial year 2023 was listed as not yet received.

Recommendation:

i. ***NAMDEVCO should provide a status update on the submission of its financial statements for financial year 2023 to the AGD for audit by January 14, 2025.***

2. Auditor's Opinions on NAMDEVCO's Financial Statements

NAMDEVCO's Property, Plant and Equipment balances were repeatedly misstated due to outstanding property revaluations. From financial year 2016 to 2020, the Auditor General issued qualified opinions on NAMDEVCO's financial statements. The International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI), of which the AGD is a member, issues the International

Standards for Supreme Audit Institutions (ISSAI)[8]. These standards (para 64) explain that auditors issue qualified opinions when financial statements contain misstatements which are considered material (i.e. incorrect) but not pervasive. For the years under review, NAMDEVCO's audit did not lead to the comprehensive conclusion that NAMDEVCO's financial statements presented the Corporation's financial position fairly in all material aspects.

The basis for these qualified opinions was the item *Property, Plant and Equipment* found in NAMDEVCO's *Statement of Financial Position* under *Non-Current Assets,* which are an entity's long-term assets such as land and buildings[9]. The problem was that the fair value – or the price at which an asset can normally be sold as at a particular date[10] – of the National Wholesale Market property in Macoya was not included in the Property, Plant and Equipment figure in the financial statements. There had not been any revaluations of the property since 2007 to determine the fair value, whereas International Accounting Standard 16 requires revaluations every 3 to 5 years. The revaluations, in turn, had not been conducted as NAMDEVCO had been unable to secure the lease for the property.

In its response to the Committee's questions for additional information, the MALF explained that the Commissioner of State Lands (COSL) was in the process of preparing the leases for the Wholesale Market in Macoya, as well as the 6 other properties used by NAMDEVCO.

For financial year 2021, the Auditor General issued an unqualified opinion, which meant that the financial statements presented NAMDEVO's financial position fairly in all material aspects. However, the Auditor General highlighted an Emphasis of Matter. The ISSAI standards (para 18) establish that an Emphasis of Matter is noted when a matter is fundamental to the understanding of a financial statement, even if that matter has not been materially misstated. The matter highlighted was the same issue of property revaluation noted in the financial statements as a basis for Qualified Opinion in each of the previous 5 years. This matter did not affect the overall validity of the financial year 2021 financial statement.

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[8] INTOSAI, ISSAI 200 Financial Audit Principles. Accessed August 30, 2024. Available: https://www.intosai.org/fileadmin/downloads/documents/open_access/ISSAI_100_to_400/issai_200/ISSAI_200_en_2020.pdf
[9] ACCA, Accounting for Non-Current / Fixed Assets. Accessed August 30, 2024. Available: https://www.accaglobal.com/content/dam/acca/global/PDF-students/2012t/sa_may08_patton1.pdf
[10] ACCA. IFRS 13 – Fair Value Measurement. Accessed August 30, 2024. Available: https://www.accaglobal.com/gb/en/student/exam-support-resources/professional-exams-study-resources/strategic-business-reporting/technical-articles/ifrs-13.html

Beyond their impact on the financial statements, NAMDEVCO's inability to access the leases for the properties it occupies has slowed the development of Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) involving the Brechin Castle and Brickfield packinghouses. These PPP initiatives would entail the development of commercial activity featuring extensive use of local agricultural produce. While Expressions of Interest for the PPPs were reviewed and submitted to Cabinet, no further progress has been possible in the absence of the leases for the properties in question.

Observations:

viii. ***The Committee notes that the absence of recent revaluations of NAMDEVCO's properties does not comply with International Accounting Standards, but understands that the resulting misstatements in the Corporation's financial statements were not made in bad faith, as the issue of property revaluation depends on the issuance of the leases, which is not under NAMDEVCO's control; and***

ix. ***The Committee notes that the delay in acquiring the leases for the properties occupied by NAMDEVCO has hindered the Corporation's ability to finalise Public Private Partnership (PPP) arrangements, particularly affecting the potential for enhanced operations and local agricultural integration. The Committee notes the benefits to be attained from the completion of the two (2) PPPs which were being prepared, as these would create an additional avenue through which to market products, boost the production of local value-added items and generate employment in specialty areas such as food science and preservation of food as well as nutrition and food security.***

Recommendation:

i. ***The Commissioner of State Lands (COSL) under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries should provide Parliament with an update on the preparation of the leases for all properties used by NAMDEVCO by January 14, 2025.***

3. Government Subvention

Due to consistently decreasing annual Government Subvention from financial year 2014 to financial year 2021, NAMDEVCO increasingly used its cash balances to help finance its operations. In its initial written submission in December 2023 to the Committee, the Corporation

described a "progressive decline in subvention" received from GORTT, and identified "heavy reliance on government funding" as one of the Corporation's weaknesses.

The MALF also explained that, to determine NAMDEVCO's annual Government Subvention, the MALF reviews Draft Estimates submitted by the Corporation, which were submitted to the Ministry of Finance (MOF) and subsequently to Cabinet for final approval.

NAMDEVCO's submission also noted that sums received were consistently less than the sums requested to cover operating expenditure. At the public hearing, NAMDEVCO's representatives explained that its annual operating expenses were around $45 million.

This contrasted with the Corporation's annual average of approximately $6 million of internally generated revenue, a difference of $39 million annually, to be addressed by the receipt of Government Subventions. From financial year 2014 to financial year 2019, NAMDEVO's Government Subvention averaged $31.8 million, peaking at $43.93 million in financial year 2015 and reaching its lowest level of $24.06 million in financial year 2021 – barely over half the amount received in financial year 2015. At the public hearing held on May 1, 2024, NAMDEVCO highlighted that the Subvention granted had since increased to $40 million for the ongoing financial year 2024. This sum is reflected in the Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure.

In order to meet this shortfall, the Corporation increasingly resorted to using its Cash in Hand and at Bank, which decreased by 93% from $59.7 million in financial year 2014 to $4.2 million in financial year 2021. At the public hearing, the Committee learnt that NAMDEVCO's balance for Cash in Hand and at Bank stood at $8 million as at March 2024.

NAMDEVCO explained that there had been delays to certain infrastructural upgrade projects owing to insufficient funding which have not affected the Corporation's operations. In line with this, NAMDEVCO's May 2024 additional submission to the Committee noted that a lack of Government Subvention was slowing the pace of the Corporation's digitalisation efforts. Overall, the funding constraints meant that NAMDEVCO had to place even greater emphasis on prudent management of its available financial resources.

Observation:

i. ***The Committee acknowledges NAMDEVCO's efforts to manage its spending carefully in light of its funding constraints, and to secure other sources of funding. The Committee***

however, is concerned about the effect of prolonged insufficient funding on the Corporation's ability to fulfil all aspects of its mandate effectively. An example of this is that the lack of funding was cited as a factor hindering the Corporation's efforts to address several of the weaknesses regarding policies and standard operating procedures, identified in the SWOT analysis of its 2019-2021 Strategic Plan.

Recommendation:

i. ***The MALF should report to Parliament on the result of its review of Draft Estimates submitted by NAMDEVCO for each FY from 2014 to 2021 detailing the difference, if any, between the sum initially requested by NAMDEVCO and the sum submitted to the MOF and providing the rationale for the changes made by January 14, 2025.***

4. Strategic Plan

2022-2025 Strategic Plan

NAMDEVCO had no Strategic Plan beyond 2021. At the time of the Committee's inquiry, NAMDEVCO's Strategic Period had expired in 2021, and no plan developed for the post-2021 period. Since 2021, NAMDEVCO continued to pursue strategic objectives and initiatives that had not been completed at the end of the 2019-2021 period covered by the most recent Plan.

At the public hearing held on May 1, 2024, NAMDEVCO explained that it was in the process of engaging a service provider via a Request for Proposals (RFP) to develop its Strategic Plan for the period 2022-2025 most of which has already passed. This method of issuing an RFP differed from the sole select tendering used to engage a service provider for the 2019-2021 Plan. The latter was a practice that the Committee was alarmed to learn about at the public hearing.

SWOT Analysis of 2019-2021 Strategic Plan

There were opportunities for collaboration with other state agencies in pursuit of NAMDEVCO's strategic objectives. As part of the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of NAMDEVCO's 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, the following were identified as opportunities:

- Provision of a One Stop Shop service for agribusiness development support, the purpose of which would be not only to provide agricultural marketing services but also to catalyse,

guide and support enterprise development with a primary focus on the non-traditional agricultural export sub-sector".

- Enhancement of marketing support service delivery in market intelligence, particularly with respect to export markets.
- Market entry facilitation and support with respect to both the domestic and foreign markets.
- Increasing the Corporation's revenue base through an expansion of its range of services.

Observations:

i. ***The Committee reiterates its concern raised at the public hearing that sole select tendering was used for the 2019-2021 Strategic Plan;***

ii. ***The Committee further reiterates its concern that the vast majority of the period 2022-2025 has already elapsed and NAMDEVCO is only now attempting to develop a Strategic Plan for that period. This exercise does not appear to ensure value for money, particularly given its likely cost and how late it is being undertaken;***

iii. ***The Committee also strongly encourages NAMDEVCO to begin the development of its Strategic Plan for the relevant strategic period beyond 2025 without delay;***

iv. ***The Committee notes, regarding NAMDEVCO's identified opportunity "to guide and support enterprise development" that the mandate of the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) is "to encourage and foster the development of agriculture and commercial fishing and industries connected therewith and to mobilise funds for the purpose of the development", pursuant to section 6 of Agricultural Development Bank Act Chap. 79:07. There is, therefore, potential for fruitful collaboration between these two state agencies;***

v. ***The Committee similarly notes, regarding NAMDEVCO's identified export-related opportunities that there is potential for collaboration with the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency – an amalgamation of the existing agencies InvesTT, CreativeTT and – most relevant to this inquiry – exporTT.***

Recommendations:

i. ***NAMDEVCO should submit the following to Parliament regarding its 2022-2025 Strategic Plan by January 14, 2025:***

   a. ***a document outlining the steps undertaken to ensure compliance with OPR regulations in the selection of the consultant for the development of the Plan;***

b. the anticipated timeline and estimated cost for the development of the Plan.

ii. The NAMDEVCO should submit to Parliament an update on the status of the development of the 2022-2025 Strategic Plan and the approaches developed to ensure a more proactive approach to the development of the strategic plans in the future by January 14, 2025;

iii. NAMDEVCO should identify the expanded services that it could offer in an attempt to broaden its revenue base and, if feasible, an estimate of the positive effect that these additional services could have on NAMDEVCO's internally generated revenue; and

iv. NAMDEVCO should report to Parliament on the following regarding the opportunities identified in its SWOT Analysis by January 14, 2025:

a. the ways in which the Corporation could work with the ADB to promote agricultural enterprise development; and

b. the ways in which the Corporation could work with the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency to boost exports in the agricultural sector.

5. Human Resources Capacity Challenges

NAMDEVCO's Internal Audit Unit and its Marketing and Market Development Unit were understaffed.

Internal Audit Unit

There were three (3) audit positions on the establishment at NAMDEVCO according to the Corporation's initial written submission. During the Committee's previous inquiry in 2019, NAMDEVCO indicated that one (1) Auditor and one (1) clerk staffed its internal audit unit.

As at December 2023, the Unit consisted of one (1) Audit Manager, one (1) Auditor I, one (1) Audit Assistant recruited via the On-the-Job Training programme, and one (1) Clerk I.

NAMDEVCO's view was that, despite these "incremental improvements"[11], the Unit was not adequately staffed. At the public hearing held on May 1, 2024, the Corporation explained that recruitment efforts were in progress for all posts across the establishment.

[11] Written submission dated December 18, 2023 from NAMDEVO, page 15.

Marketing and Market Development Unit

The Committee's 23rd Report, 11th Parliament, noted that the absence of officers dedicated to NAMDEVCO's marketing function represented a serious weakness for the Corporation's fulfilment of its mandate "to develop and expand markets, marketing opportunities and agribusiness investments". The filling of these key vacancies was identified as a key priority to be included in the 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, which at the time of the Committee's previous inquiry in January 2019, had not yet been completed.

The December 2019 written submission from the MALF indicated that none of the vacant posts related to marketing or market development were filled since the Committee's previous inquiry in 2019. The MALF noted that efforts were in progress to fill the relevant posts.

Observation:

i. ***The Committee notes that, in the SWOT Analysis of its 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, NAMDEVCO identified "deficiencies in critical skill areas" and "inadequate staff complement and skill base to effectively and efficiently carry out the Corporation's mandate". The persistence of staffing challenges is therefore even more concerning given that the problem is well understood and documented by the Corporation. The Committee anticipates the filling of all vacant posts through the recruitment drive carded to begin in May 2024.***

Recommendation:

i. ***NAMDEVCO should provide the following to Parliament by January 14, 2025:***
    a. ***a list of the critical skills which need to be brought into the organisation;***
    b. ***a list of the posts filled since the May 01, 2024 public hearing;***
    c. ***an explanation of whether the newly recruited staff have fully addressed the Corporation's skills gap.***

6. Issues with AgriPrice Mobile App

The Committee noted that members of the public faced continued and unresolved issues with respect to accessing the AgriPrice mobile app. The intention of this mobile app was allow the public access to pertinent real-time information on crop prices in Trinidad and Tobago. At the public hearing, NAMDEVCO shared that the AgriPrice mobile app which was developed in

collaboration with a student cohort from the University of the West Indies (UWI), faced numerous technical issues including unreliability, outdated code, and user dissatisfaction. NAMDEVCO advised that the app was removed from the Google Play store due to its obsolescence. NAMDEVCO has indicated that a new app would be developed utilising both the android and iOS platforms and would additionally work in tandem with the National Agricultural Market Information System (NAMIS) 4.0, which was recently updated. NAMDEVCO however, despite noting the importance of this app to its users, did not provided a clear timeline for developing and launching a new version of the app. The current state of the app negatively affected users who rely on it for real-time pricing information.

NAMDEVCO advised the Committee that its ability to rebuild the app was constrained by the need for funding, which had yet to be secured. This constraint has resulted in app developmental issues, as funding was a necessary requirement for the app's development. NAMDEVCO advised that it intended to seek international partnership to secure grant funding to develop the app which would be resident at NAMDEVCO. This reliance on external grants delayed the development process and impacted the organisation's ability to respond quickly to user needs.

The Committee notes that the issues with the app not only impacts farmers' ability to access real-time information but also hinders their market efficiency and can lead to economic losses.

Observation:

i. ***The Committee noted that while the present app is unreliable and obsolete, NAMDEVCO aimed to develop a new app and has also updated the NAMIS 4.0 app. Additionally, NAMDEVCO disseminated market information through alternative channels such as Facebook, its websites, and email lists. However, it is noted that these methods may not be as convenient or accessible as a mobile app; and***
ii. ***The Committee noted that NAMDEVCO has indicated that changes to the ICT infrastructure, capabilities, and equipment have changed since the completion of that audit thereby reducing NAMDEVCO's risks.***

Recommendations:

i. ***NAMDEVCO should continue its thrust toward app redevelopment addressing the issues experienced in the previous app and report to Parliament by January 14, 2025, on the status of the following:***

a. *the new mobile app's development;*
b. *the timeline for the development of the new mobile app as well as the projected cost for development*
c. *the source of funding or whether a grant was accessed; and*
d. *the lessons learnt from the development and launch of the previous mobile app which were applied to the development and launch of the new mobile app.*

ii. *NAMDEVCO upon the development of the new mobile app should consider the development of the following and provide to Parliament a status report by January 14, 2025:*

a. *a continuous improvement plan, including regular updates and dedicated technical support, to maintain the app's reliability and relevance; and*
b. *the integration of the app development into NAMDEVCO's broader digital transformation strategy, ensuring it aligns with the organization's goals for data collection, dissemination, and stakeholder engagement ensuring the app's long-term sustainability and impact.*

7. Internal Audit on Cash Account

Several risks were identified within NAMDEVCO's cash management processes which underscore the need for robust internal controls and management. The Committee noted the risks identified by the Internal Audit on Cash namely-

- Theft or misappropriation of cash;
- Loss of revenue due to delayed or non-collection;
- Misappropriation if arrears are not collected in the established time period;
- Internal theft due to delayed deposits;
- Delayed collection, leading to revenue loss and fund misappropriation; and
- Flawed financial records due to uncollected revenue.

NAMDEVCO outlined that its Internal Audit Plan 2022 classified risks as critical, high, medium, or low with no priority being placed on those classified as medium and low. NAMDEVCO further advised the Committee that it has been virtually impossible for all the areas, given the large scope of operations of the Corporation, to be addressed satisfactorily.

Observations:

i. ***The Committee noted the development of cashless systems by the NAMDEVO to ensure the reduction in theft and misappropriation of funds. However, the Committee remained concerned about the potential for fraud and the effectiveness of these systems in environments where cash is still sometimes used inadvertently or dishonestly; and***
ii. ***Despite the shift to cashless systems, the Committee encourages NAMDEVCO to remain vigilant in environments where cash transactions may still occur. Staff should be trained to recognise and prevent fraudulent activities, and regular audits and reviews should be conducted to ensure compliance with cashless policies and address and weaknesses in the systems.***

Recommendation:

i. ***NAMDEVCO should submit to Parliament a status report on the development and implementation of staff training protocols, regular audit and reviews of its cash-less system by January 14, 2025.***

8. Accounts Receivable

NAMDEVCO was unable to collect sums owed by some long-term debtors. NAMDEVCO noted that, aside from the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (GORTT), its major debtors consisted of a large number of small vendors. Over the period 2014 to 2021, NAMDEVCO's receivables balance fluctuated, reaching its lowest level of $12.7 Mn in 2016 and its highest level of $37.95 Mn in 2021, which was double the 2020 balance of $18.55 Mn. In its initial written submission, NAMDEVCO explained that the considerable increase in its receivables in 2020 and 2021 was a result of the Market Box Hamper programme, which was one of GORTT's pandemic relief measures.

At the public hearing held on May 1, 2024, NAMDEVCO explained that receivables as at April 2024 were down to $2.6 Mn. This figure had not changed from the June 2023 receivables balance of $2.6 Mn. The Corporation noted that much of this figure represented longstanding unpaid sums owed by vendors having used NAMDEVCO's facilities in previous years on a credit basis, before a cash-in-advance, system was eventually implemented.

The MALF's Ministerial Response to the 23rd PAC Report, 11th Parliament[12], noted that NAMDEVCO had used the services of the debt collection agency Credit Chex Ltd., from September 2018 to September 2019. This led to the collection of only $8,552. The Ministerial Response also explained that no legal action has been taken against NAMDEVCO's bad debtors, as the associated legal costs would outweigh the sums to be collected.

The notes to NAMDEVO's audited financial statements show that the sums estimated as Provision for Doubtful Debts increased from $10.74 Mn in 2014 to $13.19 Mn in 2020, before almost doubling to $23.1 Mn in 2021. Provision for Doubtful Debts represents management's estimate of the amount of accounts receivable that may not be paid by customers and would therefore eventually need to be written off[13]. Sums written off as bad debts were observed in the Corporation's audited financial statements for financial year 2017 ($1.35 Mn) and financial year 2018 ($1.11 Mn).

Recommendation:

i. ***NAMDEVCO should explore alternative debt recovery strategies for small amounts, including the following and submit a update by January 14, 2025 on the strategies which could be developed in this regard:***
    a. ***offering settlements;***
    b. ***using automated systems for ongoing reminders and collections;***
    c. ***utilizing print media or online platforms to publicly list outstanding debts;***
    d. ***alternative legal and financial strategies to recover statute-barred debts through negotiations or settlements.***

9. Customer Service Issues

There was room to improve customer service at the MALF. The Committee noted the reports of inconsistencies and inaccurate information provided at the regional offices of the MALF, which

[12] Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, MALF's Ministerial Response re: Twenty-Third Report of the Public Accounts Committeee on the examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) forbthe financial years 2008 to 2011. Accesses September 17, 2024. https://www.ttparliament.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/p11-s4-J-20190528-PAC-R23-MR-MALF.pdf

[13] Cornell University, Allowance for Doubtful Accounts and Bad Debts Expenses. Accessed September 3, 2024. Available: https://finance.cornell.edu/accounting/topics/revenueclass/baddebt

frustrated and deter clients from participation in agricultural programmes. The Committee noted that the MALF acknowledged the issue and committed to implementing a training program for frontline officers to improve customer service to ensure consistency in the information provided to clients across all regional offices.

Recommendations:

xv. MALF should provide Parliament with a status update, by January 14, 2025, on the implementation of ongoing training programs for frontline staff at the regional offices to ensure the provision of accurate and consistent information that aligns with the Ministry's official communications outlining;

- ***c. Number of training programmes conducted / planned; and***
- ***d. Number of employees targeted disaggregated by regional office***

xvi. MALF should consider establishing feedback systems to monitor the effectiveness of the training and the accuracy of information provided, allowing for continuous improvement in customer service, and report to Parliament on its plans in this regard by January 14, 2025.

Concluding Remarks

NAMDEVCO plays a key role within the agri-business sector providing marketing services to many small agro and fishing entrepreneurs and stimulating business opportunities as evidenced by the Corporation's stated plans to develop an e-commerce platform for agricultural produce, fruit ripening facilities, and specialised wholesale market reserved for certified farmers. It is noteworthy that several of NAMDEVCO's pending initiatives involve Public-Private Partnerships, which were known for their great potential to increase efficiency by harnessing the expertise, dynamism and resources of the private sector.

However, since the Committee's 23rd Report in 2019, progress has been slow in certain key areas, including the filling of key human resource gaps, and improving the functioning of NAMDEVCO's mobile app. It is clear that greater impetus was needed in these areas, and therefore the Committee made further recommendations in this regard.

The delay in the Corporation's development of a Strategic Plan was a major cause of concern as the strategic direction and adequate funding are the cornerstone of all of NAMDEVO's initiatives, as was the Corporation's challenges in accessing a sufficient level of government subvention.

This Report will be transmitted to the Ministries, Departments and Agencies to which recommendations were addressed for written response within sixty (60) days in accordance with Standing Orders 110(6) of the House of Representatives and 100(6) of the Senate

The Committee looks forward to engaging further with NAMDEVCO as part of the necessary follow-up to the present inquiry.

This Committee respectfully submits this Report for the consideration of the Parliament.

Sgd.
Mr. Davendranath Tancoo
Chairman

Sgd.
Ms. Jearlean John
Vice - Chairman

Sgd.
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy
Member

Sgd.
Mr. Adrian Leonce
Member

Sgd.
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon
Member

Sgd.
Mr. Roger Monroe
Member

Sgd.
Dr. Amery Browne
Member

Sgd.
Mrs. Hazel Thompson-Ahye
Member

Appendix I - Witnesses

At the public hearing held on May 1, 2024, the witnesses in attendance were as follows:

NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL MARKETING AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (NAMDEVCO)

Mr. Wayne Inniss	Chairman
Mr. Keydell Kerr	Board Member
Ms. Nirmalla Debysingh	Chief Executive Officer
Mr. Rayber Bowen	Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Ms. Camille Mohan Cayenne	Corporate Secretary
Mr. Lincoln Parmasar	Manager, Finance & Administration
Mr. Prakash Ragbir	Manager, Information & Communications Technology
Ms. Teresa Lynch	Personnel & Industrial Relations Officer
Ms. Dayna Garcia	Manager, Market Facilitation
Ms. Raeesah Sahibdeen	Manager, Packinghouse - Piarco
Ms. Lisa Holder	Manager, Internal Audit (Ag.)

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, LAND AND FISHERIES

Mr. Farook Hosein	Permanent Secretary
Mr. Chris Ramkissoon	Planning Officer III, Agricultural Planning Division
Ms. Candice Fakira	Senior Project Analyst (Ag.), Agricultural Planning Division

AUDITOR GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

Ms. Reahla Balroop	Assistant Auditor

	General (Ag.)
Ms. Simone Wajadali	Audit Director
Ms. Florence Dialsingh-Jairam	Audit Director (Ag.)

THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE
FOURTH SESSION, TWELFTH PARLIAMENT
MINUTES OF THE NINETEENTH MEETING
HELD ON WEDNESDAY MAY 01, 2024 AT 10:07 A.M.
IN THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE MEETING ROOM, GROUND FLOOR, CABILDO BUILDING, PARLIAMENTARY COMPLEX,
ST. VINCENT STREET, PORT OF SPAIN

Present were:

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo	-	Chairman
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	-	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	-	Member
Mr. Roger Monroe	-	Member
Mrs. Hazel Thompson-Ahye	-	Member
Ms. Khisha Peterkin	-	Assistant Secretary
Mr. Justin Jarrette	-	Senior Research Specialist

Excused were:

Ms. Jearlean John	-	Vice-Chairman
Dr. Amery Browne	-	Member

Absent was:

Mr. Adrian Leonce	-	Member

COMMENCEMENT

1.1 At 10:07 a.m., the Chairman called the meeting to order and welcomed those present. The Chairman informed Members that Ms. Jearlean John and Dr. Amery Browne had asked to be excused from the Meeting.

EXAMINATION OF THE MINUTES OF THE EIGHTEENTH MEETING

2.1 The Committee examined the Minutes of the Eighteenth Meeting held on Wednesday, January 24, 2024.

2.2 The following corrections were made:

- Paragraph 2.1: added a comma after "Wednesday".
- Paragraph 3.1, line 3: replaced "of" with "and" before "Transport", and moved the words "once received" from the end of the sentence to after "thereto".

- Paragraph 4.1: inserted "the" before "workshop" at line 5, and switched to lower case letters at the start of each of the sentences in bullet points.
- Paragraph 5.1: deleted "to: at the end of line 1 and switched to lower case letters at the start of each of the sentences in bullet points.
- Paragraph 7.3:
    - inserted commas before and after "therefore" at point 3; and
    - rephrased point 19 as "The procedures regarding service providers' compensatory payments for customers in case of damages brought about by poor quality of service".

2.3 There being no omissions or corrections, the Minutes were confirmed on a motion moved by Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon and seconded by Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy.

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES OF THE 18TH MEETING

3.1 With reference to item 3.1, the Chairman informed Members that the 14th, 15th and 16th Committee Reports, which had been circulated for Members' comments on Monday, April 22, 2024, would be laid at the next scheduled sittings of the House of Representatives and of the Senate.

3.2 With reference to item 3.2, the Chairman informed Members that the new Board of Directors of the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) had been appointed on March 10, 2024. The Chairman explained that, the Committee's scheduled examination of the Reports of the Auditor General on the financial statements of the ADB for the financial years 2014 to 2018, which had previously been put on hold pending the appointment of a Board, would therefore be conducted at the next Committee meeting scheduled for May 8, 2024.

3.3 With reference to item 4.1, the Chairman highlighted that the 3-day workshop Caribbean Regional Workshop on PACs and Trade Scrutiny, hosted from February 27 to 29, 2024 at the Parliamentary Complex in collaboration with the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA UK) had been a fruitful opportunity to share with and learn from colleagues from around the Commonwealth Caribbean and the UK and noted that the Committee looked forward to further such engagements in the future.

3.4 With reference to item 9.3, the Chairman informed Members that the responses to the Committee's questions for additional information had been received from the Regulated Industries Commission and were being used to draft the 17th Committee Report

PRE-HEARING DISCUSSIONS RE:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE REPORTS OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL ON THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS OF THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL MARKETING AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (NAMDEVCO) FOR THE FINANCIAL YEARS 2014 TO 2021 & FOLLOW-UP ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS MADE IN THE 23RD REPORT OF THE PAC, 11TH PARLIAMENT, ON AN EXAMINATION OF THE REPORTS OF THE AUDITOR

GENERAL ON THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS OF NAMDEVCO FOR THE FINANCIAL YEARS 2008 TO 2011

4.1 The Chairman reminded Members that the purpose of the public hearing was to:

- assess whether NAMDEVCO's expenditure conformed to the authority which governs it;

- assist NAMDEVCO in achieving the efficient execution of its mandate while ensuring that expenditure is embarked upon in accordance with parliamentary approval; and

- observe and assess the extent of the implementation of the recommendations made in the 23rd Report of the Public Accounts Committee of the 11th Parliament; and

- determine the challenges being faced by NAMDEVCO in implementing the Committee's recommendations and possible solutions to those challenges.

4.2 The Chairman outlined the remit of the inquiry.

4.3 The Chairman invited Members to review the Issues Paper based on the written submissions received from NAMDEVCO and from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (MALF).

4.4 The Chairman invited Members to raise any issues or questions related to the inquiry. Members discussed the areas of concern and the general approach for the public hearing.

SUSPENSION

5.1 There being no further business for discussion *in camera*, the Chairman suspended the meeting at 10:26 a.m.

PUBLIC HEARING:

AN EXAMINATION OF THE REPORTS OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL ON THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS OF THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL MARKETING AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (NAMDEVCO) FOR THE FINANCIAL YEARS 2014 TO 2021 & FOLLOW-UP ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS MADE IN THE 23RD REPORT OF THE PAC, 11TH PARLIAMENT, ON AN EXAMINATION OF THE REPORTS OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL ON THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS OF NAMDEVCO FOR THE FINANCIAL YEARS 2008 TO 2011

6.1 The Chairman called the public meeting to order at 10:32 a.m.

6.2 The following officials joined the meeting:

National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO)

- Mr. Wayne Inniss - Chairman
- Mr. Keydell Kerr - Board Member
- Ms. Nirmalla Debysingh - Chief Executive Officer
- Mr. Rayber Bowen - Deputy Chief Executive Officer
- Ms. Camille Mohan Cayenne - Corporate Secretary
- Mr. Lincoln Parmasar - Manager, Financial & Administration
- Mr. Prakash Ragbir - Manager, Information & Communication Technology
- Ms. Teresa Lynch - Personnel & Industrial Relations Officer
- Ms. Dayna Garcia - Manager, Market Facilitation
- Ms. Raeesah Sahibdeen - Manager, Packinghouse – Toco
- Ms. Lisa Holder - Manager, Internal Audit

Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (MALF)

- Mr. Farook Hosein - Permanent Secretary
- Mr. Chris Ramkissoon - Planning Officer III, Agricultural Planning Division
- Ms. Candice Fakira - Senior Project Analyst, Agricultural Planning Division

Auditor General's Department (AGD)

- Ms. Reahla Balroop - Assistant Auditor General (Ag.)
- Ms. Simone Wajadali - Audit Director (Ag.)
- Ms. Florence Dialsingh-Jairam - Audit Director (Ag.)

6.3 **Key Topics Discussed:**

1. NAMDEVCO's mandate to "create, facilitate and maintain an environment conducive to the efficient marketing of agricultural produce and food products through the provision of marketing services and the stimulation of business investment in the agro-industrial sector of Trinidad and Tobago" pursuant to section 9(1) of the NAMDEVCO Act, Chap. 63:05 (the Act);
2. NAMDEVCO submitted its 2022 financial statements to the AGD for audit in December 2023, and the Corporation's is expected to submit its FY 2023 financial statements for audit by the end of May 2024;
3. The Auditor General's Qualified Opinions / Emphasis of Matter on NAMDEVO's financial statements from FY 2015 to FY 2021 based on the issue of outdated property revaluations for the Northern Wholesale Market, with reference to International Accounting Standard 16;
4. The status of NAMDEVCO's attempts to secure the requisite lease for the Northern Wholesale Market property in order to conduct the required revaluation;
5. For the period FY 2014 to FY 2021 NAMDEVCO has received a reduction in of its annual Government Subvention, for FY2024 $40Mn was allocated. Whilst the Corporation's operating expenses were approximately $45Mn per annum;
6. NAMDEVCO's average internally generated revenue of approximately $8Mn per annum;
7. To address the shortfall due to its operating expenses NAMDEVCO utilises the funds from its Cash in Hand to address the shortfalls in Government Subvention;
8. The updating of the National Agricultural Market Information System (NAMIS) used by NAMDEVCO since 2007 to provide commodity pricing and volume information to stakeholders throughout the agri-food sector;
9. NAMDEVCO's adherence to the Trinidad and Tobago Standard for Good Agricultural Practices (TT GAP) standard, which aims to minimise risks to food safety, and the upcoming rollout of the TT GAP for farmers;
10. NAMDEVCO's registration with external regulatory bodies, such as the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA), which strengthens the ability to export Trinidad and Tobago produce to foreign markets;
11. NAMDEVCO's participation in the provision of approximately 25,000 market boxes as part of Government COVID-19 pandemic relief measures during FY 2021;
12. The status of plans for Public-Private Partnerships for the development of commercial activity featuring extensive use of local agricultural produce at the Brechin Castle and Brickfield Packinghouses and the evaluation of Expressions of Interest received in this regard;
13. The ongoing process of Cabinet approval for NAMDEVCO to secure the requisite leases for the Brechin Castle and Brickfield properties;
14. NAMDEVCO's management of 9 Farmers' Markets throughout Trinidad;
15. In late 2023 NAMDEVCO's received Cabinet's approval to manage the Carenage Fish Fry Facility and Fishing Centre. It is also expected that NAMDEVCO will assume the management of all other such facilities in Trinidad;

16. The upcoming launch of projects to develop an e-commerce platform for agricultural produce, a fruit ripening facility in Valencia and a wholesale market reserved for certified farmers;
17. NAMDEVCO's work to boost investments in value added food products;
18. NAMDEVCO's efforts to increase the use of local produce, thereby reducing the food import bill;
19. NAMDEVCO's work to provide an enabling environment for the export of Trinidad and Tobago produce, and the successes noted to date particularly with pimentos and pineapples;
20. NAMDEVCO's use of ICTs including geo-spatial technologies to generate real time data on the agricultural sector;
21. The data collection measures being conducted by NAMDEVCO regarding the fishing sector;
22. The grant programme administered by the MALF whereby farmers and fisherfolk may access up to $100,000 in funding;
23. The highly effective management of the fishing sector in Tobago and NAMDEVCO's efforts to observe and learn from the management of Tobago's fishing facilities;
24. NAMDEVCO's AgriPrice App, was developed in collaboration with the University of the West Indies (UWI) and due to the issues that could not be addressed it was removed from the Google and IOS App Stores. A new App is being developed;
25. Alternative channels, including social media and email lists, are used by NAMDEVCO to disseminate pricing information while the new App is being developed;
26. In order to reduce the prevalence of cash payments and address the risks of theft and misappropriation identified in the Corporation's 2023 Internal Audit on Cash Accounts NAMDEVO has implemented an electronic pay in advance system at market facilities;
27. NAMDEVCO's efforts to strengthen the staffing of its Internal Audit function, including a recently launched recruitment campaign to fill vacant positions;
28. There are 3,000 registered farmers in Trinidad and Tobago compared to the estimated 23,000 overall number of persons engaged in farming activity nationally;
29. The voluntary nature of farmers' participation in NAMDEVCO's farm certification and monitoring programme;
30. NAMDEVCO's procurement function and the Corporation's development of the relevant handbooks and guidelines as required by the procurement laws and regulations;
31. The requirement in accordance with section 12 of the Act, that "the Corporation shall comply with any special or general directions which may from time to time be given to it by the Minister", with "Minister" meaning the Minister to whom responsibility for agriculture and food production is assigned;
32. NAMDEVCO's use of sole select tendering to procure services for the development of its 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, as directed by the MALF in accordance with the above-mentioned provisions of section 12 of the Act;
33. The SWOT analysis of NAMDEVCO's 2019-2021 Strategic Plan;
34. The status of the development of NAMDEVCO's Strategic Plan for the period 2022-2025, most of which has already elapsed without the Plan being implemented;

35. The risk ranking summary included in NAMDEVCO's 2022 Internal Audit Plan and the rationale for not prioritising action on items ranked as medium or low risk;
36. NAMDEVCO's accounts receivables balance as at April 2024 of $2.6 million, much of which consisted of small sums owed by a number of individual vendors for their use of stalls at market facilities before the payment in advance system was put in place;
37. The limited success of the Corporation's efforts to recover outstanding sums, including via the use of collection agencies; and
38. The potential for conducting value chain studies towards the goal of increasing the Corporation's revenue base.

Please see the verbatim notes for the detailed oral submission by the witnesses.

6.4 The Chairman thanked the representatives from NAMDEVCO, the MALF and the AGD for attending the public hearing and they were excused.

SUSPENSION

7.1 At 12:49 p.m., the Chairman suspended the public meeting for a post-mortem discussion with Members only.

POST-MORTEM DISCUSSION

8.1 At 12:57 p.m., the Chairman resumed the meeting.

8.2 The Chairman sought Members' views on the public hearing. A discussion ensued.

8.3 The Committee agreed that additional questions would be sent to NAMDEVCO and to the MALF.

[**Please see Appendix]**

8.4 The Committee agreed that at its next meeting, the inquiry would be on the following:

- An examination of the Reports of the Auditor General on the financial statements of the ADB for the financial years 2014 to 2018.

ADJOURNMENT

9.1 There being no other business, the Chairman thanked the Members for their attendance and the meeting was adjourned to May 08, 2024 at 10:00 a.m.

9.2 The adjournment was taken at 13:02 p.m.

We certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

CHAIRMAN

SECRETARY

May 01, 2024

Appendix 1
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
Questions to NAMDEVCO

Issue – Strategic Plan (pages 6-11)
Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

WEAKNESS	QUESTIONS
• Deficiencies in critical skill areas; • Inadequate staff complement and skill base to effectively and efficiently carry out the Corporation's mandate	**Observation from 23rd Report:** "NAMDEVCO must play its role as a facilitator of agricultural growth to the fullest in providing reliable information, developing markets and encouraging investment. As such, hiring marketing and market development officers is of the utmost importance." These posts remained vacant as at November 2023 and efforts were still being made to fill them as per Ministerial Response to the 23rd Report. 1. When are these positions expected to be filled? 2. What are the critical skills lacking at NAMDEVCO?
• Organisation culture	3. Provide details about the weaknesses of the Corporation's organisation culture and possible plans to reform it.
• Insufficiently developed business culture	4. What needs to be done to address this problem?
• Stakeholders not sufficiently knowledgeable about the full range of services available owing to limited exposure in the sector.	5. Is this limited exposure due to stakeholders' lack of interest or is it a matter of NAMDEVCO not having the capacity to reach the stakeholders?
• Limitations in planning and decision-making owing to deficiencies in information on the agricultural sector.	**Observations from 23rd Report:** - **NAMDEVCO *needs to have readily available information on the locations of these farmers, the number of acres cultivated, and the product produced to develop a proper agricultural production strategy***." - ***NAMDEVCO must step up its efforts to have comprehensive and updated figures on the numbers of farmers currently active, whether or not they are registered, and the amount, location and status of the land on which they plant. This is to ensure that policies are formulated with a full understanding of the target audience the policies are meant to apply to and the areas that need the most attention.***

	6. To what extent are the information gaps noted by the Committee in the 23rd Report in 2019 still affecting NAMDEVCO's work today? One of NAMDEVCO's KPIs was "better return on investment based on data-driven decisions" (page 9). 7. How did the Corporation perform on this KPI?
OPPORTUNITIES	**QUESTIONS**
• Provision of a One Stop Shop service for agribusiness development support, the purpose of which would be not only to provide agricultural marketing services but also to catalyse, guide and support enterprise development with a primary focus on the non-traditional agricultural export sub-sector".	Regarding this opportunity for agricultural enterprise development, the mandate of the Agricultural Development Bank is: "To encourage and foster the development of agriculture and commercial fishing and industries connected therewith and to mobilise funds for the purpose of the development." (ADB Act, section 6) 6. Has NAMDEVCO collaborated with the ADB to promote agricultural enterprise development? Provide details.

Issue – Internal Audit / Risk Management (pages 9-12 and Appendix 1)
In 2019, NAMDEVCO indicated that it did not have a Risk Management Policy. The Corporation's December 2023 submission indicated that this is still the case now.
The lack of a Risk Management framework and of a Business Continuity Plan were flagged as critical risks in the Corporations Internal Audit Plan 2022.
Question:

1. Why has the Corporation decided to forgo the development and implementation of a Risk Management Policy?

The Corporation's Internal Audit Plan 2022 notes that
"Given the limited resources of the Internal Audit Department and the decision of the Board of Directors to send the Manager, Internal Audit on administrative leave for the period May 26, 2021 to October 10, 2021, the 2021 audit plan was incomplete."
Question:

1. What prompted the Board to send the Internal Audit Manager on administrative for this period of over 4 months?

The Committee noted the following in the Corporation's submission:

- Preliminary Report on Cash Account Audit done on Orange Valley Wholesale Market: no management response to 8 of the 11 recommendations
- Cash Account Audit – Norris Deonarine Northern Wholesale Market: no management response to 4 of the 8 recommendations

Question:

1. Does this mean that management did not take any action on the recommendations to which there were no responses?

The Corporation's Internal Audit Plan 2022 includes a risk ranking which classifies risks as critical, high, medium or low. The ranking specifies that "no priority will be placed on medium and low risk".

Questions:

1. What action was taken to address the risks classified as "high" and "critical"?
2. Despite not being prioritised, was any action eventually taken to address the "medium" and "low" risks so that they did not grow into more serious problems?

Issue: Procurement (pages 12-13)

According to NAMDEVCO's Internal Audit Plan 2022, the scheduled internal review of "procurement of goods and services less than $100,000" was conducted from August to October 2022.

Questions:

1. What were the findings and recommendations of this audit?
2. How have these recommendations been acted upon?

Issue: Internal Fraud Policy (pages 26-27)

In 2019, NAMDEVCO indicated that it did not have an Internal Fraud Policy. This was still the case as at December 2023.

NAMDEVCO's Human Resources Department investigates and takes disciplinary action based on all reports of fraud. Between 2014 and 2021, 1 report of fraud was received in 2018 and 1 in 2020m leasing to the dismissal of 1 employee in 2021.

Questions:

1. If the Corporation were to develop an Internal Fraud Policy, would this be done in-house or outsourced?
2. If it would be outsourced, can the Corporation give an estimated cost?
3. Does the Corporation estimate that the development of an Internal Fraud Policy would not be worth the resources (commitment of staff resources if in-house, or financial resources if outsourced) that would be need to be devoted to the exercise?

Issue: Conflict Of Interest Policy (pages 28-29)

The Integrity in Public Life Act Chapter 22:01 provides the following:

"29(1): For the purposes of this Act, a conflict of interest is deemed to arise if a person in public life or any person exercising public function were to make or participate in the making of a decision in the execution of his office and at the same time knows or ought reasonably to have known, that in the making of the decision, there is an opportunity either directly or indirectly to further his private interests or that of a member of his family or of any other person.

29(2): where there is a possible or perceived conflict of interest, a person to whom this Part applies, shall disclose his interest in accordance with prescribed procedures and disqualify himself from any decision-making process."

In 2019, NAMDEVCO indicated that there was no specific conflict of interest policy in place. Instead, the Corporation followed the relevant provisions of several documents including the Draft Director's Code for the Members of the Corporation, which contains conflict of interest provisions.
In its December 2023 written submission, NAMDEVCO indicated that the Draft Director's Code had not been finalised and fully implemented and was therefore "in use as a guideline only".

Question:

1. Without an approved and enforceable conflict of interest policy, how is NAMDEVCO able to reliably ascertain whether any Member of the Board or Executive has an interest (financial or otherwise) in any company that conducts business with the Corporation?

Issue: Whistleblowing Policy (page 28 & Appendix 11)

In 2019, NAMDEVCO indicated the following:
"a draft Whistle-blowers Policy and Procedure was tabled for consideration by the Human Resources Committee. It was deferred pending the passage of the expected whistle-blowers legislation".

The Committee asked in writing whether the Corporation could implement its whistleblowing framework in the absence of the legislation, as has been done elsewhere across the public sector. In its December 2023 written submission, NAMDEVCO explained that the Policy and Procedure had, in fact, been implemented in November 2021.

Questions:

1. Have any reports been received via this Policy and Procedure since the roll-out in November 2021?
2. If yes, what action was taken?

According to the review provision of the Policy and Procedure, the Audit Committee is mandated to review the document in consultation with the Executive Leadership Team "at least every 2 years".

3. Given that the Policy and Procedure were implemented just over 2 years ago, has the requisite review been conducted or it is scheduled to be conducted soon?

Questions to the MALF

General Questions

The Ministry's submission to the Committee explained that the Ministry uses the examination of NAMDEVCO's monthly cash flow statements and expenditure reports as well as Annual Achievement Reports to evaluate the Corporation's outcomes, performance and value for money (page 1).

1. Based on the Ministry's observations, to what extent did NAMDEVO succeed in improving efficiency across its units up to 2021?
2. Did the Ministry make any recommendations for improvements in this regard?
3. If yes, what were these recommendations and what action was taken by NAMDEVCO?

Issue – Strategic Plan

The SWOT analysis of NAMDEVCO's 2019-2021 Strategic Plan noted the following as a threat:

- Limited involvement in policy decision making for the agricultural sector.

Question:

1. To what extent is there scope for NAMDEVCO to play a greater role in policy formulation for the agricultural sector given its position as a key policy implementation agency?

Issue – Leases

- In FY 2015, the Auditor General noted, as an Emphasis of Matter, the issue of property revaluations which had not been conducted every 3 to 5 years as required by International Accounting Standard 16.
- NAMDEVCO explained that, while revaluations had been duly conducted for owned property at Toco and at King's Wharf, the Corporation was awaiting the issuance of leases from the Commissioner of State Lands in order to obtain valuations for other properties.
- The Auditor General issued a qualified opinion on NAMDEVCO's financial statements for FY 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 with respect to Property, Plant and Equipment. The issue was that the corporation had not accounted for the property of the Northern Wholesale Market as an asset in the financial statement.
- This was also noted in the FY 2021 audit as an Emphasis of Matter.
- NAMDEVCO explained that, although a Legal Notice was issued identifying the Northern Wholesale Market property as managed by NAMDEVCO, no lease / title had yet been issued.

Question:

1. Could the Ministry provide any assistance to NAMDEVCO on these matters of the issuance of leases so that the revaluations necessary for IAS 16 compliance can be conducted?

NAMDEVCO's submission also noted that, after the Corporation received approval in January 2023 to operationalise the Fish Dry Facility and the Fishing Facility in Carenage, the MALF had "the intention to have all fishing facilities and landing sites managed by the Corporation."
At the public hearing on May 1, 2024 it was noted that NAMDEVCO was awaiting the leases to the various fishing facility properties before it could begin to manage them.

Questions:

1. Provide details of whether Cabinet approval for NAMDEVCO's management of all fishing facilities throughout Trinidad has already been received or whether this is pending.
2. What has been done to facilitate the issuance of the relevant leases to NAMDEVO and what is the expected timeline for the issuance of these leases.

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE NINETEENTH MEETING OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE HELD (IN PUBLIC) IN THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE MEETING ROOM, GROUND FLOOR, CABILDO BUILDING, PARLIAMENTARY COMPLEX, OFFICE OF THE PARLIAMENT, ST. VINCENT STREET, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 01, 2024, AT 10.33 A.M.

PRESENT

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo	Chairman
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	Member
Mr. Roger Monroe	Member
Mrs. Hazel Thompson-Ahye	Member
Ms. Khisha Peterkin	Assistant Secretary
Mr. Justin Jarrette	Graduate Research Assistant

ABSENT

Ms. Jearlean John	Vice-Chairman
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member
Dr. Amery Browne	Member
Mr. Adrian Leonce	Member

NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL MARKETING AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (NAMDEVCO)

Mr. Wayne Inniss	Chairman
Mr. Keydell Kerr	Board Member
Ms. Nirmalla Debysingh	Chief Executive Officer
Mr. Rayber Bowen	Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Ms. Camille Mohan Cayenne	Corporate Secretary
Mr. Lincoln Parmasar	Manager, Finance & Administration
Mr. Prakash Ragbir	Manager, Information & Communications Technology

Ms. Teresa Lynch	Personnel & Industrial Relations Officer
Ms. Dayna Garcia	Manager, Market Facilitation
Ms. Raeesah Sahibdeen	Manager, Packinghouse - Piarco
Ms. Lisa Holder	Manager, Internal Audit (Ag.)

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, LAND AND FISHERIES

Mr. Farook Hosein	Permanent Secretary
Mr. Chris Ramkissoon	Planning Officer III, Agricultural Planning Division
Ms. Candice Fakira	Senior Project Analyst (Ag.), Agricultural Planning Division

AUDITOR GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

Ms. Reahla Balroop	Assistant Auditor General (Ag.)
Ms. Simone Wajadali	Audit Director
Ms. Florence Dialsingh-Jairam	Audit Director (Ag.)

Mr. Chairman: Good morning everyone. It is now 10.32 a.m. so we resume the hearing. This is an examination of the reports of the Auditor General on the financial statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) for the financial years 2014 to 2021, and the follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations made in the 23rd Report of the Public Accounts Committee, 11th Parliament, on an examination of the reports of the Auditor General on the financial statements of NAMDEVCO for financial years 2008 to 2011. Good morning and welcome to the officials from Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation, and the Auditor General's Department. My name is Davendranath Tancoo and I am the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee.
The Public Accounts Committee has a mandate to consider and report to the House on:

a. The appropriation accounts of moneys expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago;
b. Such other accounts as may be referred to the Committee by the House of Representatives or as are authorized or required to be considered by the Committee under any other enactment; and
c. The report of the Auditor General on any such accounts.

The purpose of today's meeting is for the Public Accounts Committee to conduct an examination of the reports of the Auditor General on the financial statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation for the financial years 2014 to 2021, and to follow up on the implementation of the recommendations made in the 23rd Report, 11th Parliament, on an examination of the reports of the Auditor General on the financial statements of NAMDEVCO for the financial years 2008 to 2011. To assess whether NAMDEVCO's expenditure conforms to the authority which governs it, to assist NAMDEVCO in achieving the efficient execution of its mandate while ensuring that expenditure is embarked upon in accordance with parliamentary approval. To observe and assess the extent of the implementation of the recommendations made in the 23rd Report of the Public Accounts Committee of the 11th Parliament and to determine the challenges being faced by NAMDEVCO in implementing the Committee's recommendations and possible solutions to these challenges.

Based on the issues identified, the following representatives were invited to today's public hearing: the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO), the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and the Auditor General's Department.

Colleagues are reminded that this meeting is being broadcast live on Parliament's Channel 11, on Radio 105.5 FM, and the Parliament's YouTube Channel *Parlview*. Viewers and listeners are welcome and invited to send their comments related to today's enquiry via email, parl101@ttparliament.org, via facebook.com/ttparliament, or X which is formally Twitter @ttparliament.

Allow me now to introduce other members of our committee, the Public Accounts Committee, beginning with my colleague on my left.

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Members. I will now ask officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land, and Fisheries to identify your delegation please.

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. I note that we have a fairly large complement from the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation. So, I would ask the representatives from that entity to introduce yourselves and your colleagues, please.

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Apologies. I understand that Ms. Holder is on her way and she will join us soon. That would be Ms. Lisa Holder who is the Manager of Internal Audit (Ag.). Can I ask representatives from the Auditor General's department to introduce yourselves, please?

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much to all, and welcome again to the Public Accounts Committee. I would like to reverse the order now and invite the Auditor General's Department to make a brief opening statement.

Ms. Reahla Balroop: Good morning again. Good morning Chairman. Members of the Committee. Officials from NAMDEVCO, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Under the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation Act, No. 16 of 1991 section 24(3), we have the authority to audit the accounts of NAMDEVCO and it says:

"The accounts of the Corporation shall be audited by the Auditor General or by such person publicly carrying on the profession of accountant as the Auditor General may appoint."
In the past, we have always enjoyed a productive and positive working relationship with NAMDEVCO, and we look forward to maintaining this relationship in the future. Thank you.
Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. I would like to introduce, before we go further, another member of the Public Accounts Committee who is joining us. I would ask her to introduce herself.
[*Introduction made*]
Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Please extend and accept our condolences on behalf of the Committee and our colleagues who are here today as well. Can I invite the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to make a brief opening statement, please?
Mr. Hosein: Thank you Chairman, and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to address you this morning in the enquiry into the Audited Financial Statements of the National Agricultural Marketing Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO).
NAMDEVCO is one of the statutory entities under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. It was created by an Act of Parliament, No. 16 of 1991, with a mandate to create, facilitate and maintain an environment conducive to the efficient marketing of agricultural produce and food products through the provision of marketing services and the stimulation of business investment in the agro-industrial sector of Trinidad and Tobago.
NAMDEVCO is the only state-run institution in Trinidad and Tobago that is dedicated to the provision of marketing and marketing support geared towards the development of the agricultural sector in Trinidad and Tobago. In this context, the Ministry is cognizant of the critical role that the Corporation plays regarding the development of the sector. The Ministry is pleased to be here today to assist the Committee in providing any further clarification on matters relating to the audited financial statements. I thank you.
Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much Permanent Secretary. Can I ask a representative from NAMDEVCO to make a brief opening statement, please?
Mr. Inniss: Thank you, Chairman. Well most of what the functions of NAMDEVCO are have been already said by the Permanent Secretary. I will however add that the core functions of the Corporation are as follows. To develop and expand markets, marketing opportunities, and agro-business investors. One example of this is the establishment of nine farmers' markets throughout the island of Trinidad. To develop and manage a comprehensive agricultural market information system. The NAMIS system was introduced in 2007, to capture commodity price and volume information and is now in the process of being updated to present historical trends for use by stakeholders.
To develop and expand production and investment in value-added and primary food products. In furtherance of this, NAMDEVCO has developed a range of fresh-cut fruit and vegetable technology packages, inclusive of callaloo packs, soup packs, pineapple chunks, and fruit bowls. These are being introduced in all our retail markets and are certified in accordance with good agricultural practices and guided by HACCP. HACCP means an acronym for Hazard Analysis

Critical Control Point, an international food safety management system.

10.45 a.m.

NAMDEVCO has developed a range of flour using alternative local commodities inclusive of cassava, sweet potato, dasheen, pumpkin, and dasheen leaves, and eddoes. Product development support is provided at the packinghouse facilities which we also use USFDA, a registered facility, and registered with the Barbados Trade Protocol, making the facility eligible to export fresh and value-added products to international and regional destinations. To develop and maintain market infrastructure and systems. To facilitate agricultural and food marketing in accordance with global standards.

The facility is currently dedicated to this at the packinghouse at Piarco, and Woodford Lodge, and plans are advanced for private-public partnerships for Brickfield and Brechin Castle packinghouses. Development of a fruit ripening facility at Valencia is also ongoing. And finally, to develop and manage a quality assurance system aimed at supplying safe and wholesome foods. There are certifiable food safety management systems implemented at all stages of the food value chain that are managed and operated by NAMDEVCO.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very, very much, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, you mentioned in your opening statements public-private partnerships being pursued for two of your facilities. Is that correct?

Mr. Innis: Yes, Chairman, that is correct.

Mr. Chairman: Can you give us a brief indication of what the current status is? Is it that we have now put out expressions of interest, or are we actually in conversations with persons or entities that might be interested in private-public partnerships?

Mr. Innis: We are in discussions with two—with persons of interest in the two packinghouses. That went out three years ago.

Mr. Chairman: All right. So that a process was initiated—

Mr. Innis: Yes.

Mr. Chairman:—whereby these were advertised and you had expressions of interest, so there was a process that was initiated. How did these entities with whom you are having discussions currently, how were they selected initially?

Mr. Innis: How were the private partners selected initially? Chairman, with your permission, could I ask that the CEO respond to that?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, yes.

Ms. Debysingh: Hello all, again. So, yes, expressions of interest did go out via open tendering. The respective tenderers would have expressed an interest in the respective packing houses. The tenders were evaluated, so the recommended tenderers, their names were also submitted to Cabinet. At the present time, NAMDEVCO does not have the lease for either of the facilities, and we are awaiting leases for both facilities in an attempt to "solidize" or concretize the PPP arrangement with the most probable tenderer.

Mr. Chairman: So I am glad you raised the issue with the lease because that was an issue that would have come back at some point in time too, because I am aware that there are several entities, several assets of the NAMDEVCO that are currently waiting on those leases. And that

has been so for quite a while. Can you confirm—maybe the question should be put to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, whether or not—what stage we are at in terms of how close are we to acquiring the leases, so that we can in fact engage the PPP arrangements? Sure, yes please.

Ms. Debysingh: Thank you, Chair. We do have correspondence from Cabinet, which is approximately one month old. They would have requested further information on the name to which—the name to be placed on the lease. That information has subsequently been sent back to Cabinet and we are awaiting their response. This is in respect of one of the packinghouses only, which is the Brechin Castle packinghouse. We await further correspondence from Cabinet for the Brickfield packinghouse.

Mr. Chairman: Just for completeness, just to wrap that issue up. Can you indicate how long you have been pursuing those leases from—how long you have been pursuing those leases? And the question—I want to put it in context because I want to ask a supplemental question as to whether or not the failure to be able to access to get the leases, I know that it has affected your ability to sign off on the public-private partnerships, and whether that would have had some impact on improving or not improving your ability to supply products? So whether or not—the question is, how long have you been pursuing the lease? I have a fair idea based on the written responses, but I want hear from you. How long have you been pursuing the lease, and whether that pursuit, the inability at this point, as at today to have secured these leases, whether that has affected the operations of NAMDEVCO?

Ms. Debysingh: It is approximately three years; however, it has not affected the operations of NAMDEVCO, primarily because the packinghouse is not in operation, but the premise of the packinghouse utilization by the most successful proponent is that they will utilize a larger percentage of local agriculture in operating the packinghouse. So, to date, it really has not affected NAMDEVCO's operations.

Mr. Chairman: All right. So it has not affected NAMDEVCO's operations because there is nothing there at present?

Ms. Debysingh: Right. Yes.

Mr. Chairman: So the hope is that once the lease is acquired, that you will have aggressive activity including a substantially larger local content, correct?

Ms. Debysingh: Yes. Yes, it means that the farmers on our monitoring programme will now have an additional avenue to market their products. We will see an upsurge of local value-added products coming out of that facility and, of course, employment generation in specialty key areas, especially as it relates to food science and the preservation of food, food and nutrition security, we are going to see an increase in these areas once those packinghouses are in operation.

Mr. Chairman: Any feedback at all with regard to the second packinghouse and the possibility of a lease for the second packinghouse?

Ms. Debysingh: Unfortunately, no feedback to date.

Mr. Chairman: And that would have been for the same three-year period you would have been pursuing both leases?

Ms. Debysingh: Correct.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Just a couple more questions before I turn you over to my colleagues. Question to NAMDEVCO. Can you advise—I know in your written submissions to us, to the Committee, you indicated that the financial statements for the financial year 2022 would have been submitted to the Auditor General's Department by December 15th, you gave a specific date in your written response. Has that taken place? Have you all submitted your requirements?
Ms. Debysingh: Chairman, I confirm it was submitted on the date indicated.
Mr. Chairman: And may I also ask then, given that the same legislation governs—that is the Exchequer and Audit Act, governs the submissions from almost every state enterprise, well, not almost, but every state enterprise, whether or not the 2023 financial statements have also been submitted to the Auditor General's Department?
Ms. Debysingh: Chair, with your permission, may I pass the question to our Manager of Finance and Admin—
Mr. Chairman: Sure.
Ms. Debysingh:—to give a more accurate answer?
Mr. Parmasar: Good morning all. Those financial statements are in the process of being finalized, and once that is done, will be submitted within—by the end of the month.
Mr. Chairman: So, I just want to confirm that by end of—
Mr. Parmasar: May.
Mr. Chairman:—May, that financial statements for NAMDEVCO would have been submitted to the Auditor General's Department, correct?
Mr. Parmasar: That is correct, Chair.
Mr. Chairman: Thank you very, very much. In a related question, coming back to some of the issues with the ownership and tenure. In fiscal 2015, the Auditor General had noted as a matter of what was referred to as an "emphasis of matter" the issue of property reevaluations, which had not been conducted every three to five years as required by the International Accounting Standard 16. IAS 16 requires that property reevaluations take place between every three and five years. NAMDEVCO had explained in fiscal 2015 that reevaluations had been conducted for property owner TUCO and King's Wharf and it was awaiting the issuance of releases from the Commissioner of State Lands in order to obtain valuations. So this is different from the public-private partnership. This is for valuations of the properties operated and utilized by NAMDEVCO.
I noted in our research that the same qualified opinion from the Auditor General's Department existed for financial years 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, which means basically, that those leases were still outstanding. The issue was that the corporation had not accounted for the property in the northwestern department as an asset in the financial statements. This was also noted in the 2021 fiscal year report, the audit, as an emphasis of matter. So this matter has been up in the air for quite a while, for a substantial period of time.
In your explanation to us, you indicated that a legal notice was issued identifying the northern wholesale market property as managed by NAMDEVCO, but no lease or title had yet been provided. So this question may best be put to the Ministry. Mr. Permanent Secretary, can you advise whether any assistance can be provided to NAMDEVCO or has been provided to

NAMDEVCO on these particular matters of issuance of leases, since these are critical for the organization to meet the International Accounting Standard 16? So, can you advise whether or not those leases—what assistance you can provide to NAMDEVCO from the Ministry itself to expedite the award of leases that are currently outstanding outside of the public-private partnership? This is with specific reference to the areas under which NAMDEVCO operates, the premises that they operate from.

Mr. Hosein: Chair, unfortunately, I do not have that information with me at this time, but I will provide it to you in writing.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Can I trouble you to give you a bit of a deadline; can you give me a time frame within which you think you will be able to respond?

Mr. Hosein: Within a week, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, and duly noted. And one more question before I hand you over and it is a bit of a concern. Under the heading of "government funding", based on the information provided to us in your written statements from NAMDEVCO, NAMDEVCO listed as one of its challenges that:

The corporation continues to receive less subvention than the sum requested to cover all recurrent expenditure per fiscal.

That is on page 1 of your written submission. It is one of the first items that you would have raised with us—

Because of this government funding constraint, the corporation has had to draw down from its cash at the bank, which decreased from $59.7 million in 2014, it decreased to about 7 per cent of that between 2014 and 2021.

So before we get into what is the situation in '22, '23, '24, I would like to ask, we have moved from $59.7 million cash in bank in 2014, to $4 million; from 59.7 to 4.2 million in 2021. Can you advise, NAMDEVCO that is, can you advise what is the status of your cash at banks to date, 2013 fiscal year, 2013 fiscal year the cash in the bank? You would have had $59.7 million in cash in bank, according to the accounts, according to what you have supplied to us. And up to 2021, it had dropped to 7 per cent of what it was in 2014 which is $4.2 million. I am just asking at today's date—well, not at today's date, but at the end of fiscal 2013, what would be the figure of the value—sorry, 2023, my apologies. So 2014 you had 59.7, 2021 we had 4.2, what would be 2023, what would be the value of your cash in bank at 2023 fiscal end?

Ms. Debysingh: Chair, with your permission, I would like to pass it to Mr. Parmasar, our Finance Manager, for an accurate answer.

Mr. Parmasar: Good morning again. Chair, the figure as of the end of March, March this year it was $8 million.

Mr. Chairman: $8 million?

Mr. Parmasar: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. So based on that information, cash in bank, clearly, you are at a substantial difference to where you were previously, so you have $8 million cash in bank as at today's date. Given that you also indicated to us that only 10 to 15 per cent of the income of NAMDEVCO is self-generated, the remainder is dependent of government's subventions, which is why I think

you would have accessed your cash in bank to meet the difference. You indicated that had within recent times, this is page 12 of your submission.
Within recent times, risk has increased.
I just need a little clarification as to what you would have meant when you would have referred to "risk would have increased". Page 12 of your submission to us.
Mr. Parmasar: Yes. So we are doing a lot from statements of the Chairman and CEO, we are operating the farmers markets, we are operating many facilities across the country. And our normal operating expenditure is in the region of $45 million to $46 million per annum and as indicated, we would generate about $6 million of own income and the difference is what we expect to be provided through subvention.
However, over the recent years that subvention has been less than what is required. For example, in 2020 it was $24 million; '21, 24 again; '22, 24/25 million; '23, $30 million, and for this year $40 million has been approved. So, we can see from the figures the funding deficit that we are faced with and that is why we would have utilized a fair amount of the cash reserve that we held.
Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much for that. Just to remind me please, 2015 again, based on the submissions you would have given to us, 2015 you had a $44 million subvention, which has dropped consistently up to 2021 to $24 million. But you are saying that it has then increased to a proposed expend in 2024 fiscal of $40 million.
Mr. Parmasar: For '24, the subvention approved is $40 million, but all throughout the period our actual operating expenditure was in the region of about $45 to $46 million per annum.
Mr. Chairman: So, if you have a subvention of $40 million from the Government and you have an annual spend of about $45 million, and you have cash at bank of $8 million, how do you propose—is that where the risk is?
Mr. Parmasar: Well, this year if you observe, the subvention approved has increased from $30 million the prior year, to $40 million. So if everything else is equal and we do get the $40 million, we should be able to fund current years obligations.
Mr. Chairman: I want to engage you. I want to engage you. So you would have been—how long have you been in your office, Sir?
Mr. Parmasar: Since 2016.
Mr. Chairman: All right, so you would have presided over the management of these funds—
Mr. Parmasar: Correct.
Mr. Chairman:—as you get them. So, you know there is a difference between allocation and actually, well, what you propose and what you get?
Mr. Parmasar: Correct.
Mr. Chairman: What has been your experience between what is proposed to be given to you and what you actually get in terms of the subvention for NAMDEVCO? Has it been 100 per cent proposed to actually what is allocated to you?
Mr. Parmasar: In some years we get a figure that is fairly close to what is allocated. Other years there is shortfall.
Mr. Chairman: So just for the completion of that issue, for 2023 you said you had gotten a subvention of $30 million?

Mr. Parmasar: $30 million.
Mr. Chairman: So that disbursement would have been $30 million, what would have been the allocation?
Mr. Parmasar: For that year, I believe it was fairly close to what was allocated.
Mr. Chairman: So the hope then is that you will get the proposed $40 million, which would ease your stream?
Mr. Parmasar: Yes, that is the goal.
Mr. Chairman: But you still will have a shortfall?
Mr. Parmasar: Which we generate from our own activities, we charge an income at various facilities, and therefore we should be able, all things being equal, be able to cover our total operating expenditure.
Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much for that clarification. In your strat plan, you identified that financial resource limitations constrain the effective undertaking of key functions. Now, with the exception of the fiscal 2024 when you hope you would get the moneys that were promised, with the exception of that, you have had less money coming into the system than you would have required for operations. Can you advise, NAMDEVCO, can you advise what has been the effect, negative or neutral, if it can be positive, but what has been the effect of this less-than-required subvention outside of just having to draw down on your cash? Or has that worked? Has it been that you have not had to undertake any cost-cutting exercises, you have been able to execute all your projects and programmes with the funding between the subvention and the draw downs from the cash in the bank? Or has there been a negative impact on NAMDEVCO's ability to fulfil its mandate because you have not had sufficient subventions to match your requirements?
Ms. Debysingh: Chair, if I may?
Mr. Chairman: Yes, please.
Ms. Debysingh: It has placed us in a position where we have to work well with our service providers, that is one. Because ultimately they are affected. Two, we have had to really manage costs in terms of our greater expenditure areas. Three, we have had several delays in infrastructural upgrade projects, but that did not deter the operations of NAMDEVCO. We continue to facilitate all of our stakeholders. And I would like to say that at the end of 2020 into 2021, during the pandemic period, we were able to pool our resources and execute the Market Box Project to provide approximately 25,000 market boxes to persons affected by the pandemic for approximately five months with the support of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.
And in addition to that, we were able to properly manage all of our facilities without any incidents, accidents, to satisfy the demands of our stakeholders, especially as it relates to marketing and market development. Those things we were able to manage cost and to be able to satisfy our stakeholders. So much so, that NAMDEVCO is now the operator and manager of the Carenage Fish Fry Facility and fishing facility with the intention to have all of the other fishing facilities under our management structure.
So, we have, even though with low budget allocations and we are not getting the funding that we want, we are able to strategize and manage our stakeholders and deliver to our stakeholders with the resources that we had. And I must say Chair, we had a good team to do it.

Mr. Chairman: Good plug, very, very good plug. But I just want to ask one last question because I know that my colleagues here really—yeah, this is a last, last.

Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Chairman: My colleagues here are anxious to jump into some of the things that you just said specifically with regard to the fish facility, yes. So, Ma'am, are you saying that with an expenditure of $45 million, in 2016 you had a deficit then from subvention of $10 million? In 2017 you had a deficit of $13 million; in 2018 you had a deficit of $20 million; in 2014 a deficit of $21 million; in 2015—sorry, the other way, 2017 you had a deficit of $13 million; 2018, a deficit of $17 million; 2019, a deficit of $21 million; 2020, a deficit of $21 million; 2022, a deficit of $21 million; 2023, a deficit of $20 million, and so on, and so on.

But you had a substantial deficit in subvention compared to expenditure of an average just from the guestimate of the figures of about a third. Are you saying that even with that deficit you were still able not to suffer a loss in your ability to fulfill your mandate?

Ms. Debysingh: Correct, Chair. And I also would like to add to my previous answers that we have been successfully collaborating with other agencies in the sector, who provided grant funding for a lot of our projects. I speak highly of our ICT projects where we are the first database to provide historic data on price and volume for the Macoya Wholesale Market, which is the largest wholesale market in the CARICOM.

I also speak to our NAMIS 2.0 version that is being upgraded. I also speak to our geospatial project where we are about to start national monitoring using drone technology and geospatial technologies. So we are also doing real-time data from the fields so that persons who are interested in markets and making market arrangements, they can get real-time data out of the field. We are doing so through our ICT technologies. This we have done successfully by collaborating with other agencies in the region through grant funding as well. So in that aspect, we are lifting the paradigm of agriculture, we are building more ICTs into it, making it easier economically friendly for our stakeholders. Our GAP Certification Programme, we are at the cusp of implementing the certification programme where we can certify farmers as providing safe food from the field because food safety starts from the field, it does not begin in the processing area.

So these are some of the programmes that we are implementing through partner agencies, through support, through collaborations, through partnerships and we are getting our work done. What is important we have an excellent team to do it.

Mr. Chairman: I get the impression that you are saying that you have an excellent team.

Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Chairman: I am not sure why I got that impression. But to keep my promise I want to turn over to my colleague who would ask some very pertinent questions because we had this conversation a little bit earlier on some of the issues you have raised. Colleague.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you very much, Chairman. Good morning all, and welcome again. So my questions are directed to NAMDEVCO, and I think, CEO, I will jump just behind your comments and ask—my first question would be with respect to your early admission there of the handling of the affairs of the Carenage Fishing Facility and the Fish Fry successfully done by your great team. I would like to know on behalf of other fishing facilities, especially those in the northeastern

part of Trinidad ranging from communities starting from Matelot all the way to Matura. We have many fishing facilities, yes, and I would like to know, now that you all have completed the process and successfully done your work there, how soon would we see the roll out throughout Trinidad and maybe Tobago, but throughout Trinidad but especially in the northeastern part, and what good news could be extended here today by the great team?

Ms. Debysingh: So let us start with the good news first. To the fisher folk in all of the communities, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has a grant programme that is valued up to $100,000 that all fisher folk have access to immediately, even in the absence of facilities being up to seafood HACCP certification status. So they can access that and that is one of the messages we have been spreading to the fishing communities.

Secondly, NAMDEVCO would have received Cabinet approval to manage and operate the Carenage Fish Fry and Fishing Facility. We await Cabinet approval for the other facilities but we are not just waiting on Cabinet approval, we have started in the background doing our own risk assessment and our assessments of what is needed to bring those facilities up to optimal status. We are taking copious notes, we are meeting with our stakeholders, and so once we get the go-ahead officially, we will be rolling out the plans to upgrade those facilities to ensure that the marketing and the market potentials of our fisher folk are met. But more importantly, data. Data collection is a big part of what we do, and so we intend to collect a lot of data out of all of those fishing facilities, which Trinidad and Tobago has not seen historically.

So, on those two accounts, those are some of the plans that is we have in addition to the infrastructural upgrade and meeting HACCP seafood status for all of the products out of those fish facilities, data collection is big on our agenda.

11.15 a.m.

Mr. Monroe: Just a follow-up question, do you have a proposed timeline or accomplishment timeline by the great team at NAMDEVCO and an expectation for a return approval from the Cabinet, and how soon we should expect a favourable response to have these roll-outs taking place?

Ms. Debysingh: I will have to await Cabinet but as I said, we have started the background work, it is not deterring us. The only thing is deterring us is our rights to be in those facilities and to actually do the infrastructural upgrades and to initiate that. So that is what is, you know—I do not have a timeline as to when Cabinet will approve it, unfortunately, but I trust that our Permanent Secretary is going to take back the information so that there will be some push in that direction in favour of NAMDEVCO.

Mr. Monroe: Any plans for Tobago in the scopes of NAMDEVCO in these things?

Ms. Debysingh: I will be quite honest with you all, Tobago is far ahead of us— **Members:** [*Laughter*]

Ms. Debysingh:—with the fish sector. They have excellent facilities. Through our Director, who is the Tobago representative, we had the esteemed opportunity to visit every single fishing facility in Tobago. They are well equipped. They service their fisherfolk well. It is free of charge. They do not charge the fishermen to use that facility, and fish is a big part of the business of Tobago.

So they are well ahead of us. We have learnt from them. But when we upgrade our facilities, we are sure that the learning opportunities will be mutual at that time.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: If I may just jump off on that same question with regard to the fishing facilities and landing sites. In your submission to us, to the Committee, you had indicated that—NAMDEVCO indicated that since January 2023, you had gotten approval to operationalize the Fish Fry Facility and the fishing facility in Carenage, and you had indicated that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries had provided the intention—I am quoting the submissions:

The intention is to have all fishing facilities and landing sites managed by the corporation.

Now that is in sync with what you are suggesting. You have also indicated that you are awaiting the leases to authorize you to actually initiate on-site activities, but that you are doing risk assessments, et cetera.

So therefore—question is to the Ministry officials, can you advise what you have done to expedite the movement from January 1st to date to ensure that NAMDEVCO has the facilities, the leases required to them? Because leases seem to be a bugbear in the system right now to facilitate NAMDEVCO's ability to fulfil its mandate. So can you advise what had been done from January 01, 2023—from end of January 2023, to current, to expedite the award of leases to NAMDEVCO to facilitate their agenda?

Mr. Hosein: Chair, I believe the process would be that we would need to get Cabinet's approval first, prior to taking action in that regard. We need the decision of Cabinet.

Mr. Chairman: So can you confirm that the Ministry has applied to the Cabinet seeking these licences, and if so, what time frame was that approval requested? I am trying to gauge—so I understand that there is a process and the process requires that Cabinet authorizes the award of leases. I am just trying to gauge the timeline as to when you would have requested—when NAMDEVCO would have requested to you, and when you would have requested to the Cabinet, that Cabinet take a look at these leases for the approvals so that NAMDEVCO could do its job.

[*Mr. Hosein confers with Mr. Inniss*]

Mr. Hosein: My understanding is that Cabinet has to agree to NAMDEVCO managing the facilities and then we will take follow-up action in terms of the leases.

Mr. Chairman: Are you saying that Cabinet has not agreed to NAMDEVCO's management of the facilities? Because I was under the impression, based on your submission, that that approval is done, it has already happened. What is required now are just the leases.

[*Mr. Hosein confers with Ms. Debysingh*]

Mr. Hosein: So my understanding is that we are in the process of doing exactly that, in terms of submitting it for Cabinet's consideration. However, Chair, I will get further details and provide it for the Committee.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Back to my colleague.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you, Chair. Question, again, to NAMDEVCO: In your SWOT analysis of a strategic plan, NAMDEVCO includes the following as strengths:

- Communication infrastructure to support information dissemination.

The corporation also include the following amongst its KPI—key performance indicators:

- Increase utilization of real-time validated information;
- Provide real-time data on local and international commodity pricing;
- NAMDEVCO also runs the AgriPrice mobile app and it is also meant to provide real-time information on crop prices in Trinidad and Tobago.

In 2019, based on submissions and information before us, we saw 1,000-plus persons would have downloaded the app. At that time, we only saw the number of reviews were like eight, giving an average rating of 3.2 out of 5. In 2024, we saw 10,000-plus persons downloading the app, with a review of 86 and a rating of 3.3; just a .1 increase there, again, out of 5. In your report, you noted the success of the AgriPrice app was compromised by the lack of reliability.

We also have some information here from users of the app who would have given some reviews such as:

Developer needs to make app more reliable.

That was on the 3rd of the first month, 2023. We went on to see some more comments and reviews:

No prices available.

App is not working properly.

The prices are not right.

App does not display notification.

And we went on and on even to the point where it says, by one person:

Seems like a typical government service institution, hardly ever functioning how it is supposed to function.

My question is, given the numerous reviews expressed by users' frustration with the app, how responsive has NAMDEVCO and the app developer truly been to users' concerns? And also, is NAMDEVCO satisfied with the performance and the quality of the app at present?

Ms. Debysingh: Chair, through you, I would like to direct this question to Mr. Ragbir for the technical details, and also to provide the upgrade to that app and the alternative data portals that were developed.

Mr. Ragbir: Thank you, CEO. Members of the Committee, Chairman, yes, I am aware of the comments with respect to the AgriPrice app. There is a point to note here that the AgriPrice app was a collaborative project with the University of the West Indies through a grant funding, again, for the development. The developer of the app is really the students of the University of the West Indies at that particular point in time.

Over the years, we have sought to keep the app running as best as we can by engaging independent developers to try and assist with problems that exist from time to time. We are in the process now of rebuilding the entire AgriPrice app to keep in tune with the new NAMIS 4.0 that was developed. At present, we have information that is disseminated through our Facebook page, together with our website, www.namistt.com, together with also, www.namdevco.com under the "Market Information" tab on the website.

In addition to that, information is also emailed to 250 recipients, ranging from the supermarkets, agro-processors, exporters, farmers that utilize that pricing information on a daily basis. The information collected at the wholesale markets are collected on a daily basis from 2.00 a.m. in the morning, and by 8.00 a.m., half past 8, the information disseminated to all the stakeholders. Yes,

the AgriPrice app was downloaded 10,000 times and that is because in one instance, there was a huge push, an advertisement in the newspaper regarding the AgriPrice app and the availability of the app. And based on that advertisement, we had a huge rush of individuals who were looking to see what the app can do at that particular point in time, hence the reason for the 10,000. We still have users who use the AgriPrice app, notwithstanding the comments from those who say that it is not available. Yes, it is not available from time to time because of a number of other technical issues. The app is fairly old. At this point in time, the app has been removed from the Google Play store because of how old the code is in the app. So we are in the process now of looking to build a new platform that disseminates via whether Android or Apple iOS platform as well. Thank you.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you for that response. Any possible timeline and time frame as to the development of this new app?

Mr. Ragbir: In terms of timeline, not at this particular point in time. This particular app would require some funding in order to rebuild the app under NAMDEVCO's purview. It may necessarily mean that I may have to go out again to look at international agencies to get grant funding to assist with building this app at this particular point in time. So in terms of a time frame, it will be difficult for me to say. But if we have to develop an app, it takes normally roughly around three months for us to have an app into production.

Mr. Monroe: In terms of—or from your view or NAMDEVCO on the whole, how important is this app to NAMDEVCO and also to the users of this app? How important it is to you all?

Ms. Debysingh: This—

Mr. Ragbir: In—sorry.

Ms. Debysingh: Go ahead, I will take over.

Mr. Ragbir: In the organization's view, it is very important. It serves as a means of farmers being able to have access to information in the palm of their hands. And that is a useful tool, because when it comes to negotiating our prices with middlemen out in the field, access to that information proves to be very valuable at that particular point in time.

Ms. Debysingh: But as we also indicated, the information is available to all users and it is also personalized. Once persons have the request to join our mailing list, by 8.00 a.m. every day, all of the prices and volumes are emailed to those particular persons, both in pound, in kg, PDF, Word, whatever user-friendly document they request, and the information is made available to them.

Mrs. Thompson-Ahye: Ms. Debysingh, I see CEO there, Chief Executive Officer, but is it a mistake? Are you PRO?

Members: [*Laughter*]

Mrs. Thompson-Ahye: First of all, I would like to really congratulate you on the $100,000 grant for the fishing facilities. I said to you earlier that I was delayed because I was at the funeral of Alloy Lee Ha. He was not only a teacher, but I heard in his eulogy just now, and I know for a fact because of our relationship, he used to run a fishing boat in Mayaro, you know, he had a fishing industry of his own. At the end, it crashed because this grant was not available. So that I hope

that other people would be able to carry on with their sideline fishing and even mainstream fishing with this grant.

Now, coming back to PRO, when I looked at your list of KPIs, I found it was too easy:

- Position NAMDEVCO as a workplace of choice;
- Provide a learning work environment for employees;
- Enabling challenging opportunities for employee contribution;
- Optimize talent and talent management;
- Provide a rewards and recognition scheme.

And the Chairman did warn me that when I say what I am about to say, that I date myself. But about 45 years ago, I had my first job as a law student in Central Marketing Agency and I can tell you, it was a wonderful place to work, the opportunities there and you know, it is a good workplace of choice. So you are really—you are so far ahead already, so that is why I say it is too easy. So you have to choose some more difficult ones, eh. On the last day, they even had a farewell function for me and I did a poem, and every verse was my description of members of staff, from the manager come down. They wanted to know how come I knew so much about them. Just by observing them, you know. They were very kind to me and I thoroughly enjoyed it. So I think, choose something harder because you have achieved some of those things already.

Now, in your internal audit on cash account, you noted certain risks:

- Theft or misappropriation of cash;
- Loss of revenue due to delayed or non-collection;
- Misappropriations if arrears are not collected in the established time period;
- Internal theft due to delayed deposits;
- Delayed collection, leading to revenue loss and fund misappropriation; and
- Flawed financial records due to uncollected revenue.

My question, have all recommended actions been taken to address these risks?

Ms. Debysingh: Yes, they have all been taken. I would like to also add that through our ICT department, we are looking into and we have implemented several cashless solutions—management solutions at NAMDEVCO.

So, first and foremost, what we implemented in 2020, at the Macoya market, we implemented a prepaid management system, where stakeholders and users of the market were required to pay in advance for the use of their particular trading spot, whether it is a daily fee or a monthly fee. That has been extended to all other markets to date and we are continuing to implement that system prior. What it does, that electronic system allows us to manage and match the collection of fees versus the actual fees that were paid at the facilities.

So we are building more ICT systems in an attempt to reduce our risks and to be more translucent in all of our financial transactions, in addition to minimizing the amount of cash that staff has to handle during operations.

Mrs. Thompson-Ahye: But I must warn you though, even though you say "cashless transactions", many times in such an environment—and I had an experience in Tobago not too long ago—you say "cashless", but people still end up sometimes paying cash without being aware, so when you go, you are paying twice. All right? So people—as I said yesterday, too

many smart people in Trinidad and Tobago, so we have to be always vigilant and double-check to make sure that people are not paying cash, then when you go you hear it is cashless. So, you know, always double-check because somebody always tries to be clever.

Ms. Debysingh: We will. Thank you.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Good morning, again. And Madam Chief Executive Officer, I am extremely proud of you this morning, as Minister responsible for gender affairs. In your response, you noted that attempts were being made to strengthen the internal audit function at NAMDEVCO. Could you apprise us has been what has been happening there, please?

Ms. Debysingh: In terms of strengthening our internal audit function, may I pass the question, through you Chair, to our Internal Auditor, Acting, in the capacity of Manager, Ms. Lisa Holder?

Ms. Holder: Hi, good morning, everyone. Good morning, Chair. Good morning, CEO. Thank you very much. Based on the question, the response, the internal audit department, we have established a risk-based approach in which we will be undertaking and is presently assessing, where we try to mitigate as much as possible to ensure that we are within compliance and that NAMDEVCO is in compliance of the international, as well as regional and local by the standards of auditing.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Do you think you have enough persons on staff to achieve that mandate?

Ms. Holder: At present, no, we do not.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: What is your complement, and what is the ideal complement?

Ms. Holder: Presently, the complement is the clerk and myself as the Acting Manager, with an OJT. And the right fit for the department will be the Manager, of course, an Auditor I, and an assistant, along with the clerk.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Are there any plans to advertise to fill vacant positions?

Ms. Debysingh: Yes, the advertisements will be going out this week for all positions that are vacant, not only the internal department, but at NAMDEVCO generally.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Madam—go ahead.

Ms. Debysingh: I was just told, they went out—

Mrs. Webster-Roy: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. Debysingh: Yes.

Members: [*Laughter*]

Mrs. Webster-Roy: During your discussions earlier, you have mentioned the support that was given to communities during COVID, and I am aware that Tobago benefitted. I wanted to understand what is the process by which you would have selected the service providers for the produce that were placed in the boxes, and the relationship or collaboration that would have existed with then TADCO and NAMDEVCO in terms of fulfilling that mandate for Tobagonians to receive support during COVID.

Ms. Debysingh: And this is specific for the Tobago component of it, generally. So primarily, NAMDEVCO monitors approximately 3,000 to 3,800 farmers in this country. Those farmers, we have data on. We have data on them because we monitor them every four to six weeks, visit their fields, identify their production, identify the technology behind their production, collect data on food safety aspects that support the operation of the farm. These farmers were contacted initially

to support the market box project. In instances where the production was depleting because farmers became ill, staffing on the farm was a challenge, generally the crop came to an end, we now looked at other farmers on the same programme. We went with recommendations of farmers but we did not just select produce from any farm. Each farmer, even during the COVID period, would have had to undergo an assessment, primarily because food safety is first and foremost on our agenda. So they were assessed based on the safety aspects of their operations and then they were asked to join the market box programme at a particular quality, a particular quantity, at a particular price. Failure to meet these three criteria would have meant that the produce was not accepted for the programme.

Tobago saw a similar outline—our system. So the farmers in Tobago were contracted to provide the commodities. Once we received the commodities that they were capable of supplying to the programme, those commodities were sent to a central packing area where they were processed. In the event of the produce that were not able to be supplied by the Tobago farmers, we put it on a boat religiously once a week, in a chilled vehicle, with personnel who we trusted. We took it to Tobago, we ensured that it was packed and it was handled properly, and that it reached the recipients in good condition. We also have records of the quality of the produce that were reaching the recipients. At that time, we introduced a traceability assessment, where we were able to identify the quality and the quantity that was delivered to each recipient on the programme.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: I have one more question, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Okay, thanks. I want to move to public procurement. In your submission, it was noted that:

The corporation establishes procurement and disposal functions, and adopted the handbooks and guidelines required by the procurement laws and regulations.

According to the Public Procurement and Disposal of Property Regulations, 2021, sole source selection may only be used under certain conditions. What I wanted to find out is that since these regulations were published in 2022, has the corporation used sole source selection for any of its procurement, and if yes, if you could provide the details, please?

Ms. Debysingh: No, we have not used sole source for any procurement to date. We generally use selective based on the register, now with the OPR—the OPR register or open tender.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: One other quick question. I know a number of entities have been having challenges, in terms of persons not being on its register and it affecting their ability to conduct work. What has been your experience at NAMDEVCO, and what strategies are you trying to put in place to overcome that?

Ms. Debysingh: We encourage persons to be registered on the OPR. We lend as much support as we can, but the OPR is law and they have to comply with the law. So our role is to continue to advise them that they must meet the OPR requirements.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Because as a corporation, it has not affected you, that slow uptake of persons registering and all of that?

Ms. Debysingh: Not right now. Not right now, no.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Okay. Thank you.
Mr. Inniss: But if I can—[*Inaudible*]—on that. You are speaking particularly for farmers. Yeah, well, since 2023, when the—NAMDEVCO does not buy from farmers—produce from farmers. It is only on the market box programme did we acquire products directly from farmers. The challenge that we will face going forward is if we have to repeat the market box programme, farmers will have to register, and that will pose a significant challenge.
Mrs. Webster-Roy: And you started sensitizing the farmers—[*Inaudible*]
Mr. Inniss: Yeah. But we do know that the farmers—because of the compliance issues required by the OPR, farmers will have a difficulty in getting registered.
Mrs. Webster-Roy: And your challenge would be to empower them to get them to that place, right, Madam CEO?
Members: [*Laughter*]
Mr. Inniss: Well, we are working on them, yes.
Mrs. Webster-Roy: Okay great.
Ms. Debysingh: Through the intervention of our Deputy CEO, we have written to the OPR to seek a solution, in conjunction with the OPR, to support these farmers who we anticipate will have to meet the OPR requirements for when the market box project starts. Yes.
Mrs. Webster-Roy: Thank you.
Ms. Debysingh: You are welcome.
Mr. Chairman: Before I go to my other colleague, you indicated in your presentation and your response to a question earlier that you had reached out, or you were reaching out to between 3,000 and 3,000 and something farmers. Can you advise how many farmers are actually registered with NAMDEVCO?
Ms. Debysingh: To date, approximately 3,000. And I say that figure because we are switching to a digital record-keeping system, because we are collecting data real time on the field, so we have approximately 3,000 farmers. The 800 would come because some farmers are not consistent farmers. Some of them would have, you know, left the profession for some time, given the lands to their children, so it requires a new registration process. So it is approximately 3,000 at this time.
Mr. Chairman: Okay. So in the written submissions from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, I saw reference to a project that the Ministry was pursuing. This was—I believe it was—I am not too sure what the project was, for which they indicated that sufficient funds were not provided. But in this, what is important for this question is that in this response from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, they indicated that phase two of the goal that they were pursuing would reach 23,000 farmers. That is a huge difference to the 3,800 maximum that you would have been looking at. So this is suggesting that we have 23,000 farmers. You are suggesting that NAMDEVCO's reach is between 3,000 and 3,800. Can you advise how you propose to bridge that gap, or why you think that that gap is substantial, why do you think that gap exists, and how do you propose to bridge that gap?
Ms. Debysingh: So NAMDEVCO's Farm Certification and Monitoring Programme is a purely voluntary programme. It is not mandatory, so farmers have to volunteer to join our programme.

There is an estimation of approximately 23,000 farmers nationally. This project that we are speaking about is the geospatial project. Sorry, for want of a better word, I am not a technical person, this is the drone project, where we are going to be utilizing drone technology and geospatial technology to actually identify real-time production data on the ground.

Of course, we are going to have all the licences, all of the legal requirements to be able to identify the production and the stage of production, and we are also looking at the cultivars that are being cultivated on the fields, so that we, NAMDEVCO, can provide more accurate and real-time national data in terms of production.

Who is this going to help? This is going to help policymakers. It is going to help businesses. This is going to help persons on the ground whose businesses are agricultural trade. This is going to help agro-processors and agro-processing industries who need to plan for the future. It is going to help our supermarkets, our hotels and also, it is going to help our regional buyers, because a lot of our data also goes to regional buyers throughout the CARICOM.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you very much. And I know that the mandate of NAMDEVCO is indeed a work of progress. I want to congratulate you all on doing your part in strengthening the nation's food security, and having some very successful programmes, in terms of the market box programmes, the number of farmer's markets, that they are now across the country. And of course, having the availability of a wide variety of food, and including fruits and so on, at a good price. I think we can see the strides that you are making. And now you are doing a lot more, in terms of satisfying the country's demand for food, and therefore, through your own domestic production. And therefore, for every additional production that you do, and there is produce available for the population, there are less imports required.

You talked about data collection. Are you measuring your import substitution levels? Because, we talked about reducing food imports, and I never liked to see the figure, because the figure naturally—because of the level of inflation that we have had in the post-COVID environment, it is difficult to measure, to see the progress made in terms of the numbers, but in terms of the volume, I think we are importing less. But, are you able to measure, imports substitutions? Are you able to quantify in any way?

Ms. N. Debysingh: Unfortunately, we are not able to quantify, or measure import substitution. But about three years ago we launched a programme, "Grow What You Eat and Eat What You Grow" and during that programme, we also taught persons how to utilize local commodities to make a basic item as flour. And how to utilize that flour in your daily menu applications. But, we do not measure, as how we would collect data at our wholesale markets, and various other institutions where food is traded. We do not measure the level of import substitution. But we do play a role in encouraging persons to eat more local through our farmer's market initiative as well. As well as through the several technology packages that we are developing, and making available to the members of the public, and the agro-processing community, in an attempt to utilize more local commodities.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: At the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries, PS, is that an exercise that you intend to undertake to truly establish, and to monitor your levels of import substitution?

Mr. Hosein: Certainly, that is one of the priorities we will place—we are in the process of establishing a monitoring and evaluation unit at the Ministry, and that will be a priority. But, just before I conclude on this matter, I just wanted to make a clarification, in terms of the agro incentive grant, which is provided by the Ministry, it is not just for fisherfolk, but for farmers as well. And they can apply for this, and it is open at all times. There is not a close-off date, so it is a continuous process, and from time to time, we do the evaluation, and provide the grants of $100,000 to farmers and fisherfolk. Thank you.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: I would add my voice to that. That is yet another very successful programme. That $100,000 grant that is easily accessible by farmers, or those intending to get involved in farming. But one of your key performance indicators naturally, is broadening in your revenue base, and you talked about deficits in terms of you funding, and so on. So, you have to aim to satisfy yourselves and to improve your revenue based, and so on.

Now one of the ways, and though your focus would probably be on supplying domestic demand, one of the ways is also through exports. Now even though you would say well, good, the focus is on import substitution, and the improving our levels of production to supply the local population, there still can be that exercise of developing select products. And not just okay, and I am just going to export everything that I make. But developing that select or specialized product, or crop that is needed in the export—in an export, but particularly export market. Has there been any focus on that? Because I think it has to be done side by side, with your domestic intent?

Ms. N. Debysingh: Through the packing house in Piarco, we maintain our US FDA status, which allows us to export as a recognized packing house, as well as our Barbados trade protocol status, which allows us to—which is recognized throughout CARICOM.

Because NAMDEVCO is a facilitator, we create that enabling environment to support export to international and regional countries. We also, through our initiatives guide on the best practices that will support export from Trinidad and Tobago. We play a role in assisting the exporter to manage costs. Because we know once they get into that international market, costs competitiveness is the biggest challenge that the exporter has. So, the equipment, the methodology, the assistant with the best packaging, those sorts of advice. The SPS issues, we lend support, so that the Plant Quarantine Officers are allowed to come to the packing house to issue Phytosanitary Certificates for exports. And we have been doing exports on the request of exporters from the Piarco packing house, primarily in the area of hot peppers and pimentos.

As of recently, there has been interest from an exporter out of Canada, to have 8,000 pounds of hot peppers and pimentos shipped to Canada on a weekly basis, and that is 8,000 pounds of each commodity. So, we have been working with exporters, and providing that facilitating environment for them to export, because NAMDEVCO is not the custodian of the goods, or the export buyer or seller. We do provide that enabling environment, and we also track prices, landing prices at various establishments, internationally, for example, the Miami Terminal Market and the Canadian terminal market, where we can advised exporters of, when is a good time to export.

I am going to also tie back to our farm certification programme. These farmers are also certified according to the NAMDEVCO certification programme. The certifier is the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and it is based on these monitoring records, we recommend to produce, and we know that produce are fit for export market. So whenever exporters are looking for produce, we recommend these farmers to them. So the value chain which ends at export, we provide a lot of facilitating services to support export into regional and international countries.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you very much for providing that level of understanding to us about your facilitation of those farmers who wish to export, and continue to export to their various markets and so on. And particularly noting, that you continue to do the level of certification that is necessary for these export farmers. I am trusting as well that you are giving advice, in terms of packaging and labelling that is necessary for particular markets.

But, I still come back to the point of broadening your revenue base and looking and being very strategic in your decisions, that I am going to focus on these select items, or specific crops that are necessary, that are required in particular markets. Is that kind of analysis and exercise done? Yes a farmer may wish to export what he produces. But, have you in the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries, or at NAMDEVCO's strategize as to specific products that can bring great value, if introduced to farmers for production, for exports, for particular markets. In other words, I am looking for the strategic intent at increasing our export revenues through particular items.

Ms. N. Debysingh: Through you, and through you Chair, may I ask Ms. Dana Garcia to give us some more information on some of the strategic crops that buyers have expressed an interest in.

Ms. Garcia: Good day everyone. To date, buyers have expressed interests in hot peppers, meaning hot peppers/pimentos. We have had buyers from the regional, as well as international. A special interest in these particular commodities. We have had shipments to Antigua, to agro-processors—somebody would have wanted 400 pounds, and as we said we would have facilitated this request by providing farmers, who can supply the hot peppers, as well as recommending exporters, and also through our packing house, who would have packaged, sorted the hot peppers to be taken for shipment.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: I recognized that hot peppers and pimentos are in great demand, and you have been doing that. But, I still think there must be—you have to really look at what you can produce. You are able to produce, in addition to that, and that would probably be required in other markets, and so on, especially for Barbados with its hotels, et cetera.

And I note the improvements. I note the improvements in terms of those, like for example IFarm who is involved in vertical farming and now is producing a wide variety of products, that are just right for the hotels, and so on, including all of our—including mushrooms of a high quality, et cetera. They have tried the blue oyster mushrooms, which I think is fantastic, and which would fit into all of these restaurants within the region, and so on, and hotels in the region.

So, again I am looking at the strategy, I am not just saying that we are doing this and there is a market. I am saying, is there a strategy? I am looking at the complementarity, what we are able to produce, and what is in fact required by—I am just looking at the CARICOM catchment area—hotels within the CARICOM area.

12.00 noon

Ms. Debysingh: One of the commodities we have been working on in recent times, and where we are close to closing the project on, is a pineapple value-added product that is manufactured from our local varieties of pineapples. It serves two purposes., one,

1. alue addition and long-term use in that you do not have to have the fresh fruit, but you do have a local product; and
2. two export opportunities.

So the product is being created using no additives, no preservatives, local varieties of pineapples, and we are not utilizing canning technology. We are utilizing a special pouch technology to create the product because we are looking also at the environmental aspect of packaging once it is completed use.

This product, because of its very nature, will have the potential of a shelf life of up to one year under particular conditions, low temperature conditions of course. It has the potential to be shipped. It has the potential to replace imported pineapples, and it was tested on a pilot phase at some of our restaurants and hotels as a substitute product for the pineapple menus that they serve. So, as a focus, we can say this one cultivar or this one variety of pineapple is being developed for utilisation in regional and international markets.

Ms. Gopee-Scoon: I am pleased to hear you raise the idea or the point about the value chain development because NAMDEVCO has had these packing houses for quite a while and I think we have to look beyond that and the creation of market linkages and so on. Have you done a study at all on value chain development and market linkages and opportunities therein?

Ms. Debysingh: That we have not done anything in recent times, no. We would have done historically on cassava. We would have just collaborated with Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards on a pineapple value chain study but we have not done any on our own on any particular commodity within recent times.

Ms. Gopee-Scoon: I would just want to suggest that—look into the future, but the successes that you have had to date, I think we really want to be all-embracing and look at the whole value chain and the opportunities that lie therein, especially as you want to increase your revenue base. Thank you.

Ms. Debysingh: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: If I may, I want to go back to the finances. We had indicated before that you were operating on effectively what is a subvention plus your cash in bank to make your payments. But, I saw in the submission from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries a question was asked by your committee as to the value of the debt of NAMDEVCO. The figure that was given to us was that at June 2023 the debt to NAMDEVCO was $2.638 million as at June 2023. In the NAMDEVCO submission, a related question was asked: Who were the corporation's major debtors over the period? That period was 2014 to 2021, and the response then was the Government and many small vendors. So I want to marry these questions now with a question of my own, which will carry me down in the direction depending on your response. So can NAMDEVCO tell us what is the current debt outstanding to your organization, your most recent figure?

Ms. Debysingh: Chair, through you, may I ask Mr. Parmasar to answer this question for accuracy?
Mr. Chairman: Sure.
Mr. Parmasar: As of the last report, or last month's report, it is about $2.6 million.
Mr. Chairman: Million?
Mr. Parmasar: Million.
Mr. Chairman: All right. So the figures are relatively the same. So, just for clarification, before I move on, is that the same debt that existed? So, is this a long-term debt that has not changed, or is this a recurring debt where we have debt being sorted out and new debt coming in?
Mr. Parmasar: A significant portion is in fact hardcore in that it is not moving. As I indicated, most of the debt relates to persons who would have used the facilities many years ago and would not have been paying. We have since moved away from credit granted for the use of the facilities, and it is now largely a cash-based, cash-in-advance arrangement.
Mr. Chairman: Alright. So I am assuming Sir, that that would fall in line with what the NAMDEVCO submission was, that the major debtors were Government and many small vendors. So, a substantial amount of this would have been the small vendors. The Ministry's response to whether or not any action has been taken to recover debt that was, and I quote:
Legal action was not taken as the cost of undertaking legal action will outweigh recovery.
So the Ministry has opted that the cost of pursuing the resolution of the debt was almost equal to or higher than the value of the debt itself so it did not make sense pursuing it. I may not necessarily agree because there are ways to treat with that to to recover the costs of recovering the debt, so I may not necessarily agree that. The question I want to ask is, how would the Government be owing NAMDEVCO, what—I mean Government and many small vendors were owning this $2.6 million. That is substantially hardcore debt. I understand the many small vendors that would have used your facility, but would there has been a government component of that.
Mr. Parmasar: That comment was in respect, I believe, of the 2021—
Mr. Chairman: Up to 2021, correct.
Mr. Parmasar:—that there was an amount that was outstanding from the Government in respect of the market box programme which they—
Mr. Chairman: Okay. So that has been sorted?
Mr. Parmasar: Yeah so that was sorted out. So it is not the Government per se in the 2.6.
Mr. Chairman: Well, that is even more frightening because that market box project would have been a substantial value to debt. So, if you lifted that off after 2021, how is it that we still have a $2.6 million debt in—well currently?
Mr. Parmasar: Well, a lot of them, as I indicated are small vendors who use the markets, very many of them owe a $200, a $300, a $400 and so it goes. One part of it is a 1.5 million that is due in respect of an advertising board arrangement that we had, and that remained outstanding. It was taken to court. I believe we won the judgment and we are in the process of enforcement or recovery. So, we have attempted to collect the amount stated, we would have engaged debt collectors, such as Credit Chex and someone else called Callserv, but very limited success,

because in a lot of cases, you cannot even find the persons. Now, as I said, the debt goes back many, many years.

Mr. Chairman: All right. So, I am not too sure get the clarification that I was trying to get. What—so you help me to help you.

Mr. Parmasar: Sure.

Mr. Chairman: And then help me back. So the value of the Government debt, which was the market box debt, can you give me an idea of what that was as at 2021 when the debt existed?

Mr. Parmasar: It would have been in the region of about 14 million representing one month's contribution that was owed for the month of September. So they did not pay for the month of September in terms of their contribution, funding of market box programme, and then subsequently they did pay after the end of September.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. But we were talking still about a 2 point—

Mr. Parmasar: Six.

Mr. Chairman:—6 million.

Mr. Parmasar: So if you look at the amount as at September it would have been like, what 14, $16 million or so?

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, 15 point something.

Mr. Parmasar: So, it went down after the payment it went down back to that hardcore $2.6 million.

Mr. Chairman: So, we have to know right off $2.6 million in debt, is that correct? Or is it that that advertising board would be a substantial component of that?

Mr. Parmasar: It would be a substantial component if we were to recover the full value, which is 1.5.

Mr. Chairman: What—well, outside of that advertising board then, can you give me an idea of what then would constitute the hardcore debt? Because you have pursued resolution of that outstanding.

Mr. Parmasar: Right.

Mr. Chairman: What then will remain as the hardcode debt that NAMDEVCO, I assume, will now be looking to write off?

Mr. Parmasar: Well, as I said, very many small vendors who would have been using our markets, our facilities for a stall you would charge $100 a month. So, many of them would have accumulated $200, $300 and so it goes to accumulate that figure.

Mr. Chairman: I am just trying to get an idea of the difference. So you have $2.6 million that is the—sorry to belabor the point, I am just trying to get clarification, $2.6 million that would been the outstanding debt as you have provided. And we have part of that outstanding debt which is the advertising board. What is the value of either the advertising board debt or the value of the rest? I am just trying to get—

Mr. Parmasar: The rest would be 1.1 million or so, 2.6 less 1.5.

Mr. Chairman: Right. So basically, we are looking at 1.1 and this would have been hardcore debt that would have been outstanding for a substantial period of time, which makes no financial sense to pursue according to the response that we have received, correct?

Mr. Parmasar: That is correct.
Mr. Chairman: Can you advise whether any initiative or any action has been taken to write off that debt off your books, or is that going to be maintained and carried year to year?
Mr. Parmasar: They have been provided for in our books, but we have written the Ministry seeking permission.
Mr. Chairman: To write off?
Mr. Parmasar: To write off.
Mr. Chairman: Another question, with regard to the strategic plan, the 2019 to 2021 strat plan was developed externally based on information provided by your good selves to the Committee at a cost of 75,000. The corporation's written submission indicated that the method used to procure the services of the development of the plan was and I quote:
Sole select based on section 12 of Act 16 of 1991.
Now, I know the CEO just made a comment on the use of sole select, but that is not my question. My question is related to the Act, but we will come back to that. The section of the Act, referred to, that section 12 of Act 16 of 1991 says and I quote:
"In the exercise of the powers and duties conferred and imposed on it by this Act, the Corporation shall comply with any special or general directions which may from time to time be given to it by the Minister."
So in your response to us, you indicated that you have selected a provider to do the strat plan, the value of $75,000 based on sole select, but that selection process was based on the Act, this Act now refers to the exercise. So you are telling us basically that the Act refers specifically—the Act you acted under refers specifically to the requirement of the Minister to give direction.
My question, Ma'am, is whether or not any such direction was given by the Minister, because in your response to us, you cited this section as the basis on which you made a decision. And this section is, that the requirement for the NAMDEVCO to follow the guidelines of the direction of the Minister. So my question, just to repeat, is whether or not any guidelines were provided by any Minister for the selection of this entity to do the strat plan.
Mr. Inniss: Chairman, the answer to that is yes. We were directed by the hon. Minister then to use the services of the person who did the strat plan.
Mr. Chairman: Can you advise—now this is very interesting and disturbing at the same time, because the law is there which facilitates that action. Can you advise whether that recommendation to use a particular provider, whether that was provided for in writing or verbally, and if so, to whom was it addressed?
Mr. Inniss: I received the verbal instruction.
Mr. Chairman: So Sir, you are saying that as Chairman you received an instruction from a Minister, a sitting Minister of Government, who says you should use this provider as opposed to using another process, maybe selective tendering? You suggest—I just want to be very, very clear because this is an issue of some serious concern now.
Mr. Inniss: That provider, as far as I am aware, was doing work already with the Ministry and he was directed to use his services because we were seeking an appropriate consultant to do the strat plan.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah. And I understand that. So that the provider would have been in the system for a while, and therefore, would probably have been in the best position. My query is because when NAMDEVCO wrote to us, NAMDEVCO cited the direction of the Minister and by your own admission, the Minister gave a directive to utilize entity A or B or C, in fact they utilized a particular entity. Whether you think that that is not an unusual or possibly inappropriate methodology for selecting any supplier of any service, a ministerial direction should only be given under specific types of circumstances. The provision of an actual service which is what has been done here for the development of a strat plan is a wide-ranging service provided by many service providers. Do you think that this is a natural—well, I want to be very careful, because this may have other kind of repercussions. But do you think that this is a normal way of doing business, that you would have liked to see business being done?

Mr. Inniss: Given the circumstances at the time and the urgency of the requirement, yes it was—

Mr. Chairman: Has there been any other requests by a Minister to engage in any other activity, any other provider outside of anybody else?

Mr. Inniss: No.

Mr. Chairman: Chairman, can you also advise what was the justification provided by the Minister to select this particular entity for this process?

Mr. Inniss: Because of his professional capability.

Mr. Chairman: This is the provider?

Mr. Inniss: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Outside of that, or even prior to that, did NAMDEVCO make any suggestion or recommendations to the Minister for the selection of a supplier for this service?

Mr. Inniss: No.

Mr. Chairman: So, this would have been the service provider for the 2019 to 2021 strat plan. Who was the provider for the period before that? Who would have done the strat plan for the period before that?

Mr. Inniss: At this point in time, I am not aware.

Mr. Chairman: Sir, are you aware that according to the Ministry of Finance investment decision, sole selective tendering and I quote, the investment decision:

"…should only be used in rare and exceptional circumstances."

As it is:

"…the least transparent form of tendering."

That is from the Investment's Division Procurement Practices and Public Procurement and—you understand what I am saying?

Mr. Inniss: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: That sole selective tendering should be used only in the most extreme circumstances, and respectfully, I cannot fathom how the selection of a provider for a service for which there are many providers nationally and internationally, I cannot fathom how that could be such a critical, rare, and exceptional circumstance in keeping with the Ministry of Finance Investment Division's mandate "used only in rare and exceptional circumstances." I cannot fathom that. I urge you to explain to me why that fits, that rare and exceptional circumstance

criteria. It might be a bit unfair because the direction was given to you as opposed to the Minister, the Minister giving the direction. I understand that. My clarification would be whether—in fact, let me help you. Did you, when you received that instruction, what was your position? Did you suggest to the Minister that we would like to go out for tender, what was your response to that?
Mr. Inniss: No well, under the Act, the Minister can give that direction. So—
Mr. Chairman: And, I assume that—yes, yes. I am not critiquing—
Mr. Inniss: There was no need to engage him in any additional discussion.
Mr. Chairman: But even so, are you aware of the Ministry of Finance Investment Division's requirements, and provision for sole selective tendering, that it must be on rare and exceptional circumstances? So, even though the Minister has the authority under the Act, to so do, it is guided by the restriction that it must be on rare and exceptional circumstances. And the selection in this case of an entity that does strat plans—unless that, and this is for an organization that is not unique in itself. So, I do not see the technical essence that we require a specific sole selective tender of an entity.
Mr. Inniss: As I said before, given the circumstances, the prevailing circumstances at the time that would have been the best decision.
Mr. Chairman: I take that, Sir. What were the prevailing circumstances?
Mr. Inniss: The urgency for having it done.
Mr. Chairman: This is 2019 to 2021?
Mr. Inniss: Yeah.
Mr. Chairman: How would that have been urgent Sir? If we knew from the end of the strat—we knew when we had a strat plan, the last strat plan was ending 2018. Obviously, we would have known that a strat plan was required to move the agency forward from 2019 to '21. How are you going to end up—if your management structure is so good, how are you going to end up in a situation where it becomes urgent now to do a strat plan because of lack of foresight from 2015 to'18, which was the last strat plan? How did we get to a point of urgency where a Minister must now say, hire this person instead of anybody else?
Mr. Inniss: As again I said, the prevailing circumstances required an urgent act at the time to get it done. If we had to seek a provider through advertisement it would have delayed the plan.
Mr. Chairman: Sure. But you are aware that there are options. Not just the open tender, there are various other options of selecting a provider, which would have been a lot more transparent than a sole select.
Mr. Inniss: Well. That provider, as I said, was involved in similar exercises at the Ministry at the time. So, it was quite in order to be recommended.
Mr. Chairman: I am not judging whether it is order or not. I am saying that it is highly unusual, the method in which we have approached, but I think my colleague wants to say more on this.
Mr. Monroe: Thank you very much, Chair. Chair, may I ask for the perspective of the Ministry of Agriculture or the PS intervention at this time based on the same question you are asking?
Mr. Hosein: Chair, I am sorry, I cannot be helpful in this matter because I do not have that information.

Mr. Chairman: If I may continue, can you indicate whether that provider actually provided the strat plan, so that strat plan was provided on time?
Mr. Inniss: Yes.
Mr. Chairman: Who is the provider for the strat plan from 2021 going forward? Is there a strap plan?
Mr. Inniss: No, we do not have a provider.
Mr. Chairman: There is no strat plan from 2021 going forward.
Mr. Inniss: We just did a tender for a provider.
Mr. Chairman: Sir. So we are—again, just for my clarification, what period are you looking at for this new strat plan?
Ms. Debysingh: '22 to '25
Mr. Chairman: Excellent. So here is my concern. Come back to the same issue. We are talking about a strat plan from 2022 to 2025 or '26, whichever one it was. From 2022, which is gone, we are now looking to do a strat plan for a period which has already passed.
Mr. Inniss: No, it has not passed. It is for '22 to '25.
Mr. Chairman: Twenty-two. So your strat plan is going to be looking at implementing a plan Sir for the period 2022, '23, '24,'25, correct? '22 is gone. '23 is gone. '24 is going. How is your strat plan going to treat with those—because a strat plan is a plan moving forward, it is not a plan—it is a plan moving forward building on the past.
Mr. Inniss: Yes.
Mr. Chairman: Correct. So you have a situation where we have had no strat plan. Now, I understand that you would have done activities, probably following up and that is why I am trying to save you, following up on what items in the previous strat plan up 2021 did not complete. So you are using '22 and '23, et cetera to complete, I am trying to help you. However, in not helping you, where was the urgency then? What did NAMDEVCO do then, to expedite this, given that we have had no strat plan from 2022 to the current, but we saw an urgency and we took the instruction of a Minister then in 2019?
Mr. Inniss: I cannot answer that question.
Mr. Chairman: Okay. So, that is—Sir, just out of public curiosity, can you advise—you have now gone out for tender for a strat plan for a period half of which has already gone, but you did not go out for tender for a strat plan for 2019 to 2021. Do you not see the difficulty in that?
Mr. Inniss: I do not understand the question.
Mr. Chairman: Okay. Can you advise the name of the company that provided the strat plan for the 2019 to 2021 period?
Mr. Inniss: I know it is the provider was Dr. Zameer Mohammed.
Mr. Chairman: Given that Dr. Mohammad—so it is an individual as opposed to a company?
Mr. Inniss: Yes.
Mr. Chairman: Given that the individual is such a solid performer that he was recommended by ministerial direction in 2019 to 2021,why did the entity, why did NAMDEVCO not go back to him to do the 2022 to 2025 strat plan, hopefully before the expiry of the 2021 or anytime between '22, '23,'24?

Mr. Inniss: Well, he is invited to—he is welcome to respond to the invitation to tender.
Mr. Chairman: So Sir, the time frame has passed. All right, I do not want to belabour the point. I think I have made my point that there is a little difficulty in the way the process has taken place. I turn over to my colleague here, she has a question to ask on the debt.
Mrs. Thompson-Ahye: If I may, through you, Mr. Chairman, the response that we were given about the debt is that it was going to be—why it was not being pursued, it would have been too costly, yes? So, what would have happened is that the amount of money you would have paid to recover was more perhaps, than what you have recovered? I would imagine that this would have been based on your previous experience of the entity that you had used for debt recovery, yes? You have to look at something and then see how much money you spent to recover and then you say well look, you know, I might as well forget it. Do you have a legal department?
Mr. Inniss: Yes, we do.
Mrs. Thompson-Ahye: All right. Because when I look, I do not want to call the entity's name or the proportion of the—whatever how it was quantified. But, I will urge you not to discount the debt, do not forget it. But go to your legal department and ask if they can write letters to the various persons, the various debtors, and that may help in recovery of the debt. Do not go by what a collection agency charges, that is not the norm. They are in the business, in a particular type of business, but your lawyer may be able to produce some results. So before you completely write it off, that is my little suggestion to you. Yes.
Mr. Inniss: Noted, but some of those debts are statute barred.
Mrs. Thompson-Ahye: Well, of course, it cannot be. I will not advise you to go for a statue barred—
Mr. Inniss: And just for clarity, the issue with the advertising board, I would ask the Corporate Secretary to just expand on it, through you.
Mrs. Thompson-Ahye: And I just want to make a point though, even though a debt is statute-barred and there may be no legal entitlement as such, there is still the moral question. And sometimes you can appeal to people and say, look you owing me this money, and even though you cannot do it legally that person may be moved to have some sense of shame and may still pay you. It is not unknown, so do not give up yet.
Mr. Inniss: Noted.
Mrs. Thompson-Ahye: Because you know this two point something, if they might have bought chicken feed with it, but is not chicken feed. So, just try and pursue it.
Mr. Inniss: Yes.
Mrs. Thompson-Ahye: Yes?
Mr. Inniss: Through you Chair, could I have the Corporate Secretary explain the issue with the advertising board?
Mr. Chairman: No, I want to continue. I want to pursue something.
Mr. Inniss: Okay.
Mr. Chairman: So, sorry I really to move the agenda forward. One of the—before I turn over to my colleague again—in appendix 2, internal audit report 2022, risk ranking in documents

submitted to us by NAMDEVCO. Appendix 2, internal audit report 2022 risk ranking. Several of the risks listed, and I want to cite them quickly:

Item 13. Limited resources to replace obsolete computers, server infrastructure copiers. Ranking of the risk minimum.

Item 14. Frequent failure of server, internet, copier, and computer hardware. Ranking of the risk, medium.

Item 15. Limited use of ICT to support agricultural marketing due to lack of PSIP funding. Risk, medium.

Reduced finances result in poor-quality equipment or substitute products. Risk, medium.

So those are several items that you have listed on your risk ranking as having medium-level risk. Some of those are significant in what they are. The replacement of old and obsolete computer equipment and ICT equipment that is an issue of concern in a world going forward into the 21st— well we are in the 21st Century right now and we are going toward the digitization and computerization of all aspects of our operations.

But at the end of the table, and this is where my concern is, at the end of the table I see an asterisk. No priority would be placed on medium and low risk.

That has me a little bit concerned because the specific items listed, the replacement of obsolete equipment et cetera, et cetera should not be an item where we have—well, let me ask it differently, should that not be item where there is some level of priority and importance placed? Because if you say "no priority is placed on medium or low risk", that is literally saying I am not going to pay attention to it. But computerization and ICT use is a major concern and I want to tie that into the question when we were talking about the app and the app being free and there were issues with the app et cetera.

12.30 p.m.

Part of the concern raised was, in fact, access to funding. So if we have on the one hand access to funding, I know what you said before that you were able to make do, et cetera, but clearly we have obsolete equipment, et cetera. We have an app that needs updating which we have had to shut down basically because it is not, we do not have the funding to so do. It does not seem that all is well. But explain just for clarification, what did you mean by:

"…no priority will be placed on medium risks in relation to the ICT issues."

Ms. Debysingh: Chair, for a little background, this risk assessment was done by the then auditor/manager at the department. So this was her report in terms of assessing the risks at the corporation in an attempt to advise the Board because that position reports directly to the Board on the areas of risk that will be focussed on in the audit plan for 2022. Hence it is understood that that statement was made that the priority of assessing the risks in these areas will not be given priority for that audit plan, but in a subsequent audit plan. So in that auditor's wisdom that is why she would have made that statement.

Mr. Chairman: So revenue collection of:

"Valencia Farmers Retail Felicity. Critical"—risks.

"Failure to attract and retain high quality staff, lack of training, high staff absenteeism, lack of confidentiality, staff shortages. Critical"—risks.

So am I to assume that those are critical risks?—and there are few others, but those are critical risks and therefore NAMDEVCO as an entity is going to place, because they are critical risks, substantial effort in resolving those issues. Correct?

Ms. Debysingh: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: By the same token, obsolete equipment, ICT equipment, et cetera, et cetera, identified as medium risks and the notification says, that medium risk items are not going to be focused on. It might be one of the reasons why we have an app that is giving problems, et cetera. Elsewhere in your SWOT analysis you indicated as well in your SWOT analysis a similar concern, that there were issues with specific regard to equipment, a lack of sufficient equipment, et cetera, to conduct business. So, I am still not clear as to whether or not NAMDEVCO is actually focussed. Now, this is 2022, so maybe '23 and going forward may have a difference, but I am still not actually clear that NAMDEVCO is now not going to be focused on replacing obsolete equipment, engaging in a higher level of computerization, et cetera, et cetera, especially now since the Ministry of Finance has promised you substantially more money.

Ms. Debysingh: Chair, we do have evidence that we have upgraded our equipment. Perhaps at this time there were challenges at the corporation and hence it was written into the report, because this was based on a real-time audit that was done by the manager at that time. But we have since, as indicated, we are collecting real-time data, we have developed more apps, we have developed more systems that are ICT based at the corporation through grant funding with others agencies that we have employed.

So, I would like to beg your—to say that, these risks are lower at this time because we have new equipment, we have new technologies that we are utilizing at the corporation. As a matter of fact, we have gone paperless in some departments based on the new technologies that we are utilizing. For example, collection of price and volume data and field data on our farm certification programme.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. I will rest for now on those issues. I turnover to my colleague for some more questions.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you very much, Chair. I know time is upon us and pretty soon we will be wrapping up. Let me just ask from the CEO one question, and also I want to ask you a question and then I would move over. Where do you see NAMDEVCO and its associations in the near future, within the next year or so? I want you to give us that view.

Ms. Debysingh: Within the next year we will be the custodian of the TTGAP Certification Programme. We have engaged a consultant to help us on the final leg of the implementation of the certification programme. Phase one of the certification programme implementation scheme is completed, we have two more phases to complete. We expect within the next year we will have that completed, and part of that is to actually have approximately 100 farms TTGAP certified for market entry into various markets and recognized by various markets. So that is one.

Our ICT technologies will continue to grow. We will continue to provide more and more technology-based marketing solutions. As a matter of fact, we are the recipients of a UNCDF grant where we are working with a solution provider to provide an e-commerce platform. That project is also expected to be completed within a year. So, we are going to take commercialization

of the marketing platforms on an e-platform.

We will, of course, continue to develop, and all of our facilities, market facilities inclusive of our farmers' markets, there are some infrastructural upgrades that we have gotten PSIP funding for those projects, so we will we continue to upgrade. Inclusive of Macoya, Orange Valley Fish Market, the Woodford Lodge facility, the Piarco Packinghouse and, of course, I would like to say that NAMDEVCO has written a project to implement, construct and implement the first fruit ripening facility in Trinidad and Tobago. We are very proud of that project. We would have received funding in this fiscal year to initiate the project and we have done so.

So, we are also constructing a wholesale market for certified farmers only. What does that mean for the industry? It means you can go to that market to purchase wholesale volumes of certifiable produce bound, that are suitable and bound for export markets as well, whether it is regional or international, so we are in the process of constructing that. So those are some of the big-ticket items that we will achieve within one year: ICT, our physical infrastructure and our certification programmes in relation to guarantee in persons that they are in receipt of safe and wholesome foods.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you. So all in all from what you have just said there, it seems that NAMDEVCO in heading in the very good and positive direction.

Chairman, the Chairman of NAMDEVCO would have indicated just a while ago that the corp. sec. one of his assistants who is here today with his support team, as the mention of the team, was willing to give a response to a question posed. I would like to actually hear the prospective of that response from the corp. sec. at this time.

Ms. Cayenne: So, Chair, just to provide some clarification, in respect of the legal department, it is just one person, the corp. sec. With respect to the outstanding payables, or receivables, I should say, of the 2.6, 1.5 was relating to a digital display board contract which the service provider who succeeded in that tender, did not pay for some time. We did get a judgment, so it is in process of enforcement at this time.

In respect of the $1.1 million outstanding, the problem with it is not that we are not writing. Where we have addresses we are able to write however, we do not have addresses for all of them. They are—some of them actually the majority of them are statute barred, but the major problem relates in terms of contact information, because if we cannot get the contact information of the persons who are owing, then we cannot send the correspondence. So that is the problem we have. We do not have sufficient information concerning those who are owing to take further steps.

In respect of the issue of the strat plan, the strat plan, the previous provider for the 2019 strat plan was asked to provide a quote, and then subsequent to that, the procurement regulations would have been—well, the Act would have been proclaimed and as such the new system would have required three quotes, at least. So that system was implemented. It went to the Board, it was approved however, the funding is the problem with issuing the contract to the successful tenderer. So, I just wanted to provide that clarification.

Mr. Monroe: Okay. Thank you for your clarification, but in terms of the persons who are owing—

Ms. Cayenne: Yes.

Mr. Monroe:—I am just suggesting that you all may use the option of print media and those that maybe—those owing persons into the public domain and the like. Thanks.

Mr. Chairman: So one of the key threats in your SWOT analysis referred to limited involvement in policy decision for the agricultural sector. So NAMDEVCO is telling us, that one of the key threats in their SWOT analysis which is the basis of the success or failure of your organization, is limited involvement in policy decision-making for the agricultural sector. I do not want to ask NAMDEVCO that question. I want to ask the Ministry. Is there any scope at all for NAMDEVCO to play a greater role in agricultural policymaking given their current role and responsibility? Because they see it as a threat that they do not have the ability to get involved in more decision-making.

Mr. Hosein: Chair, I think there are opportunities for NAMDEVCO to be involved in policymaking. Recently there is a new person who has been a technical adviser to the hon. Minister on state boards, and both the CEO and the Chairman can liaise with that person. The technical adviser to the hon. Minister on state boards, and through that mechanism they can provide policy advice and suggestions that can be taken on board by the Minister and the Ministry.

Mr. Chairman: Just for completion of that point. Who is this technical adviser?

Mr. Hosein: Ms. Jacqueline Cheesman.

Mr. Chairman: "Hmm." Thank you. The last question that I have comes from online and I think it may be a bit of challenge too. I could probably answer it on your behalf, but I am obligated because the question was raised online. It shows that our people are listening and have interest in what we are doing which is commendable. The question for the response of NAMDEVCO: The unavailability of coconut water, is NAMDEVCO aware of the unavailability of coconut water to the local market? And if so, what is being done to treat with this issue?

Ms. Debysingh: NAMDEVCO is aware of the unavailability of coconut water on the market. NAMDEVCO has supplied data on farmers who we monitor, who do have coconut water. We have also provided data for the last three months on the volume of coconuts that are available for water at this point in time. So from a marketing perspective and based on our mandate and our role, we have the data to support volume of production and volumes that will come onto the market in the next three months, information which we have supplied to one of the directors at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Mr. Chairman: That information is accessible to the public—

Ms. Debysingh: It is.

Mr. Chairman:—so the public can know?

Ms. Debysingh: It is. It is. If you need historic data, we will just invite you to call our office and we will provide the historic data, analysed, to anyone who is interested in a particular commodity.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Member Monroe.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you very much, Chairman. My final question would be to the PS, the Permanent Secretary. PS, just a question here coming again from north-east Trinidad, people who are dear to my heart. We have been privy to information and as we are aware, all entities

involved here today would be and continue to strive towards excellence. Putting information out in the public domain from your mainstream Ministry often reaches the devices, the ears and to persons throughout the country. What we have been experiencing, based on a message that came to me here is that, the Ministry would put out information inviting persons to partake in different things that the Ministry offers, and we know you all offer a lot. However, when they go to their regional offices, and I would not name any particular regional office, but when they go to their regional office they somehow or the other get inaccurate or different information as to what is advertised. This has often led to persons becoming frustrated who are very interested in either revitalizing their agricultural plot, getting involved or even the young ones who seem to want to become involved, based on what is made available by the Ministry.

How is the Ministry going to rectify that challenge to ensure that all their regional offices do carry through with the information that comes from the mainstream Ministry, and not create their policies and give wrong information to persons often deterring them from venturing along the path of getting involved in agriculture and also helping us to have a well-thriving agriculture industry.

Mr. Hosein: The issue of customer service is one of the priorities that the current hon. Minister in the Ministry has highlighted, and in this regard we are currently pursuing a training programme for our frontline officers in terms of treating with our clients and our customers. We hope with this additional training and the provision of the information to our offices in the Ministry, that there would be improvement in this regard. Thank you.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you. Thank you for that response.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. Before we wrap I just want to cite something that we have just been made aware of. At NAMDEVCO.com/market/list/recent. Here we have—so your site is up. Here we have a piece of information with regard to coconut water. So based on the question that the members of the public asked, we raised the issue with coconut water and we have provided some information. So there is some data on the screen, but I want to point you into what the members of the public would see:

Coconut. Fresh coconut for water $5 per pound.

So there are two items. The second one:

Coconut. Fresh coconuts for water $5 per pound.

Now, I am not too sure—it is just the semantics, but you understand the point. That there are some little issues there, and I know for sure that nobody is buying coconut water by the pound. I am fairly confident of that, at least, not in Trinidad and Tobago, maybe somewhere else, but it highlights some of the deficiencies and if you could find one, you could probably find others as well, that members of the public are going to see on that site.

Ms. Debysingh: Chair, can you just share that site with us again, please?

Mr. Chairman: NAMDEVCO, just now. Hold on. NAMDEVCO.com/market/list/recent. I will have this screen shot and sent to you as well.

Ms. Debysingh: Appreciated. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah.

Ms. Debysingh: It does not sound familiar to us, but we will—

Mr. Chairman: It does not? Well, that is even more interesting.
Ms. Debysingh: I am checking the IT team and the marketing team who post the data, so we are—
Mr. Chairman: Then that is even more interesting.
Ms. Debysingh: We appreciate it.
Mr. Chairman: Yeah. That is even more interesting, because that should bring us to questions about the possibility of hacking, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But in the interest of time, et cetera, I know that the standard responses would be, to some of those questions, that "we are working on it".
I want to thank you all very much, the team from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the team from NAMDEVCO and the team from the Auditor General's Department which we did not give much work today thankfully. It has been a very enlightening experience and I want to thank you all for your forthrightness and transparency in the responses that you have provided. I also want to use the opportunity to thank the members of the viewing and listening audience for their comments and the couple questions that came in, and to wish you all safe travels home and continued success in your operations. Thank you all very much.
12.49 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*