

FOOD BASKET COST SHOOTS UP: JCTR CALLS UPON PARLIAMENT TO SERIOUSLY LOOK AT THE RISING COST OF LIVING

The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) is calling upon Zambian parliament scheduled to open its final sitting of the year on 7 November to take a serious look at the rising cost of living in the country and come-up with immediate and intermediate measures that would help mitigate the suffering of the people caused by the rising cost of living.

According to the JCTR's monthly food basket for a family of six in Lusaka, the cost of living has gone up by a huge margin. The survey indicates that for a family of six in Lusaka to survive, without taking into account transport, health, education, housing, etc., they would need K290,310. This shows an increase of K11,935 from the September figure of K278,375.

This rise is in the wake of an interaction of various forces. The increase in the cost of fuel has precipitated an increase in inflation and also has necessitated corresponding increments in the prices of various commodities and services. Added to all this has been the Kwacha's continued depreciation in relation to the United States Dollar. According to Barclays Bank, the Kwacha will continue to fall until the end of the year and probably continue doing so in the New Year.

Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of JCTR's Economic and Social Development Project, observes that while some of the factors leading to rising cost of living may be external, there is every need to look at domestic interventions that would help cushion the serious negative impacts on the poor.

According to Muweme, "if the added cost of our fuel in relation to other countries is also influenced by tax imposed by government, why not remove or minimise that tax to levels that would not send huge spiralling effects in terms of price increases?" It is common knowledge that manageable fuel costs will have long term positive effects on the development of our industry as well as attracting the much talked about foreign investors and improving our trading possibilities within the new COMESA FTA agreement.

The other intervention should be to make next year's budget pro-poor not in rhetoric but in reality, that is in practical policy terms. There are ways and means through which the rising cost of living and deteriorating living standards can be checked. For example, Parliament should look at specific things like abolishing school fees, directing resources towards health care, improving agricultural policies, etc. The current socio-economic trends continue to marginalize people's participation in economic development in that they are incapacitated. This situation is in itself an antithesis to development.

Muweme further says, "It is time that the debates and decisions in Parliament should be orientated towards issues that would help improve poor living conditions and ease the general suffering of the people." This, in JCTR's view, should especially characterise the coming sitting of Parliament.

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