

REFLECTIONS ON THE YEAR 2001: JCTR FOOD BASKET AND NEEDS OF THE ZAMBIAN PEOPLE

As Zambia approached the end of the year 2001, two issues became very prominent: the tripartite elections and deterioration in living conditions. The former is now past us while the latter is still with us taking on even worse proportions, says the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR).

The current situation of rising cost of living cannot be attributed to anything else other than poor planning. The price of mealie meal in Zambia -- considering the country's natural endowments -- need not be as high as it is currently. The country can and should certainly grow its own maize to meet the demands of Zambian families, observes Muweme Muweme Coordinator of the Economic and Social Development Project of the JCTR.

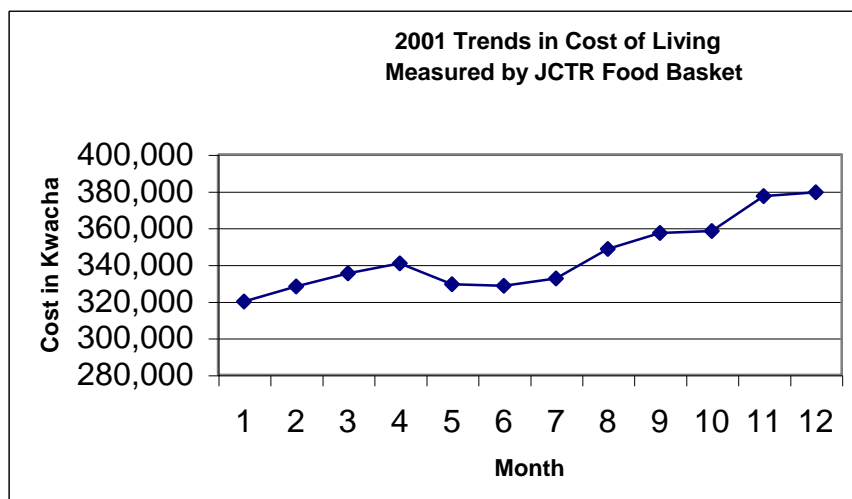
According to Muweme, the JCTR monthly Food Basket that measures cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka stood at an all-time high figure at end of year 2001. It was up by K2,090 from the November figure of K377,300 to K379,390. Two points need to be mentioned here regarding these figures.

First the increase in the cost of the Food Basket is mainly attributed to the rising cost of mealie meal. The price of mealie meal remains highly volatile. As a consequence, the price asked for this first week of January in many markets varies between K30,000 and K65,000. The cost reflected in the Food Basket on 24 December 2001 averages K28,730.

Second, the K2,090 increase in the cost of the Food Basket, though relatively small, is taking place within the context of an already high cost of living. Moreover, the JCTR Food Basket does not include in its measurement the cost of housing, transport, electricity, water, clothing, health, education, etc. It is a measure only of basic necessities for human survival.

Alongside the continued serious deterioration in living conditions during the year 2001 were also efforts on the part of government at containing inflation and attaining the growth target set out at the beginning of the year. Muweme observes: "While inflation has allegedly been contained to manageable levels around 17 Percent, cost of living as revealed by the Food Basket continued to rise for the whole of the year." (see figure below)

Figure:



The cost of the Food Basket for 2001 opened with a January figure of K319,870 and closed with a December figure of K379,390. This represents an increase for the year of K59,520 in the cost of the Food Basket or an inflation figure of 19 per cent.

"While dealing with the problem of inflation and reaching certain economic growth targets are important, more important is the question of how those efforts translate into improving the lives of ordinary people," says Muweme.

What Lessons for the Future?

We know that targeting inflation alone is not a panacea to solving the problem of cost of living. There has to be greater attention to agriculture and other sectors of the economy that are potentially huge employers and also impact positively on living conditions.

Due to the poor performance of the agricultural sector, we are witnessing a phenomenon where rural people are relying on supplies of mealie meal from the urban centres. This obviously is creating the problem of affordability on the part of the rural population as most of them do not earn any income to purchase the commodity. Moreover there is also the problem of distribution, considering that some roads are impassable during the rainy season.

Muweme also says that there is need for government to avoid having to deal with crisis situations by ensuring that measures are put in place well in advance to solve an imminent problem or disaster. "The current maize situation in the country would not have taken such proportions had government been more prudent in its planning," states Muweme. Going by the current situation in relation to the distribution of farming inputs, one would find it very difficult to be hopeful about a productive agricultural season during this present year.

JCTR therefore calls upon government to exercise a greater sense of empathy and to solve the current problem of high cost of living in the country especially as it is currently manifesting itself in the price of mealie meal. Moreover, we call upon the new Administration in State House and the new Parliament to meet later this month to address more rational planning to meet the needs of the Zambian people. "For this reason" says Muweme, "we are encouraged that the key person in charge of the Zambian economy is now called the 'Minister of Finance and National Planning'."

[For more information, contact Muweme Muweme, Economic and Social Development Research Project of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection, P.O. BOX 37774, Lusaka, Zambia; tel: 260-1-290410; e-mail: jctr@zamnet.zm; internet: www.jctr.org.zm]