

JCTR SAYS HIGH COST OF LIVING ENHANCING REPRODUCTION OF POVERTY

The current and continuing rise in cost of living is reproducing poverty in such a way that it will be difficult for the majority poor people of Zambia to come out of it, observes Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Economic and Social Development Research Project of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR).

If one looks at coping strategies -- as revealed by the Living Conditions Monitoring Survey (1998) of the Central Statistical Office (CSO) -- such as reduction in the number of meals taken per day, reduction in the usage of household items like soap, asking from friends, substituting ordinary meals with fruits and other non-conventional meals, etc., one finds that they are very indicative of creating a cycle of poverty and generally impact negatively on households' ability to move out of poverty situations in a sustainable fashion. "Indeed," says Muweme, "these coping strategies are not in themselves sustainable, neither do they lead to decent sustenance of life."

According to recent estimates as indicated by the JCTR Basic Needs Basket, the cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka now stands at K825,500 up from the month of March figure of K824, 600. The cost of food *only*, still stands at more than K300,000. "We can see here that even the most basic need of human existence, adequate and nutritionally balanced food, is beyond the reach of many households," says Muweme.

It can also be observed that the high price of mealie meal has since the last quarter of 2001 been one of the major contributors to the rise in cost of the Basic Needs Basket. Other non-food essentials such as cost of housing, charcoal, water, etc., are amounting to K499,200.

As the country celebrates Labour day, which falls on 1 May, it is important that as a nation we reflect and critically look at the conditions in which labour is living. It is imperative that labour is taken care of because it plays a very important role in national development.

"It must be realised that the high cost of living is preventing people from effective and comprehensive participation in national economic activities. This situation is an antithesis to development," says Muweme.

Muweme also observes that it is important that any economic framework that is being pursued by government does not disadvantage the people, especially the poor whom it is supposed to serve. Instead, an economic framework must create conditions that will enhance the dignity of the human person through guaranteeing availability of food, shelter, medical care and basic education to people. People are the most important resource and players in economic activity, they are not only the means of achieving development but are the sole purpose of achieving that development.

The JCTR, following the lead of the Church's Social Teaching, holds that "the economy is for the people, people are not for the economy." This principle should be guiding both public and private actions in economic matters. It should make a difference in the priorities, Muweme feels, of the current negotiations going on over KCM and what to do if Anglo-American Corporation pulls out.

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