

JCTR ENCOURAGED BY GOVERNMENT DECLARATION OF A NATIONAL DISASTER BUT CALLS FOR LOOKING BEYOND CURRENT SITUATION

The declaration of a national disaster by government in light of the looming hunger situation in the country offers some hope in dealing with the problem effectively. However, the situation requires that appropriate and urgent measures are put in place to avert crisis of huge proportions, says the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR).

Reports that some parts of the country will run out of food as early as July are a clear indication of the urgency of this problem. "The current problem of hunger in Zambia might be devastating because of the context in which it is taking place. This year's hunger situation is a result of the recent drought the country experienced as well as a carryover from the previous year's situation of lack of adequate food," says Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Economic and Social Development Research Project of the JCTR.

Muweme observes that "what is needed -- within a short period of time -- is a full-fledged proactive stance by government in addressing this problem". While the winter maize project might contribute towards meeting the national shortfall, the fact that some parts of the country will run out of food as early as July makes it imperative to also find alternative ways of addressing the problem.

In addition, it is *critical* when making maize available, especially in rural communities, to look at the question of the ability of these communities to afford buying the food in light of the poor agricultural performance, the source of their income.

"A lot of households in Zambia have suffered prolonged hunger or inadequate food intake. The only difference between their daily experience and the current situation is the *intensity* of the problem and the *cause*," says Muweme. Therefore, it is also important that government goes beyond looking at the situation in its current form and look at those factors core to accessing food by households, especially poor households. For example, it is difficult to see how a situation of unemployment and generally low wages can enable access to adequate food.

It is a foregone conclusion that one of the major reasons for inadequate food intake by majority households in Zambia is the high cost of living. The JCTR Basic Needs Basket -- which measures cost of living -- for a family of six for the month of May now stands at K814,350, slightly declining by K11,150 from the month of April figure of K825,500. This reduction can be attributed to marginal declines in the cost of mealie meal, kapenta and charcoal. The cost of food *only* for May is K317,150 compared to April's figure of K326,300. However, cost of living is still very high for many households in Zambia.

The JCTR is encouraged by government for declaring a national disaster in view of the current food situation in the country. "However," says Muweme, "it will be important to see that declaration in *concrete* terms through enabling households to have access to food, an important element to human dignity."

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