

CLARIFY POSITION ON SCHOOL FEES, JCTR URGES GOVERNMENT

With the current high levels of cost of living in the country, it is *imperative* that Government immediately clarifies the issue of school fees, says the Economic and Social Development Research Project of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR).

Indeed, the news last month from the Ministry of Education about the abolition of all school fees up to grade seven was received with a great sense of relief by the majority of households throughout Zambia. However, the relief was short-lived following the pronouncement soon after by the Ministry of Finance and National Planning that parents were still obliged to make payments for the education of their children until budgetary arrangements had been settled.

"The abolition of school fees is one of the important aspects to removing impediments for attending school in the current situation especially by the poor," says Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Economic and Social Development Research Project. Research findings in the recent JCTR study, "Will the Poor Go to School: Cost Sharing in Education in Zambia," demonstrated clearly that the policy of cost sharing had negative consequences.

The study, done in collaboration with OXFAM, showed, among other things, that *households are spending on primary education nearly twice the amount that is provided through the public budget*. But the economic constraints on households are increasingly intolerable and as a consequence many young people are not being sent to school.

The abolition of school fees could have relieved many households of the current situation of the high cost of living. The JCTR *Basic Needs Basket* which estimates the cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka stands for the month of March at K824,600, up from the February figure of K823,510. This indicates an upward adjustment of K1,090. "Though this adjustment might seem to be minimal," says Muweme, "it is however taking place at an already extremely high level of cost of living."

Moreover, if we draw our attention only to food -- excluding the cost of essential non-food items -- it can be seen that *only* the cost of feeding for a family of six is still high, currently at K327,300. "How many households in Zambia have above K300,000 as monthly income at their disposal?" Asks Muweme.

JCTR therefore urges government to move quickly in ensuring that all school fees for the primary school level -- just one of the many loads bringing hardship to many households -- are abolished. This must be done very clearly, not just on paper but in practical terms (and hopefully subsequently for secondary level). Only in this way can there be an assurance of sustainable development for Zambia for the future.

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