

GOVERNMENT MUST PUT HUMAN INTEREST AT THE CENTRE OF THE CURRENT PROBLEM OF BUDGET OVERRUN, SAYS THE JCTR

What should be the guiding principles surrounding the proposals or solutions to the anticipated problem of Zambia's national budget overrun? This is the question posed by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) in light of the current problem and debate on the anticipated national budget overrun.

At one level it is a matter of resolving the problem in the interest of future economic prosperity of the country. At another level, however, it is matter of ensuring that the conditions of employees, on which development attainment is predicated, are given the critical consideration necessary for development to take place.

"The people as a means and an end to development is where the current crisis of our situation of the national budget overrun lies," says Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR. Simply put, which way should government take? Starving its people for anticipated future economic redress or pay now what is justifiable in light of high cost of living? While on one hand future economic prosperity is critical, on the other hand to deny what is supposed to be paid as a wage sufficient to meet household needs is unjust and an antithesis to development. It is to arrive to the conclusion that government has no money, therefore let the employee suffer various forms of deprivation.

There have been many years of hard sacrifice by the Zambian people as they have contributed to the process of national economic building. However, solutions that have been prescribed and implemented have not in fact brought substantial curative action to the continuously ailing economy. Prominent among the myriad constituents of the ailing economy is cost of living. "In fact, says, Muweme, "this is where the justified demands that have led to an upward adjustment of wages and housing allowances are coming from."

The *Basic Needs Basket*, the JCTR monthly estimation of the cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka, has, despite recording reductions in the price of mealie, consistently shown serious difficulties that households are encountering in meeting their daily essential requirements. The total cost of the *Basic Needs Basket* for the month of June stands at K1,012,100. For May it stood at K1,028,650. The cost of food *only* is K365,400. In May food *only* was costing K376,950. The reduction in the cost of food *only* is on account of the lowering price of maize because of the adequate harvest the country is experiencing this year.

Muweme further says that in calculating the total *Basic Needs Basket*, costs of transport, clothing, health, personal care, etc., are not included. If these costs were to be included, the cost of the *Basic Needs Basket* would certainly be higher than what is being presented.

In calling for human considerations in dealing with the current problem of national budget overrun, the JCTR is not advocating for consumption at the expense of production. Rather the JCTR is placing human considerations high due to the realization that wages that enable employees to actually experience sustainable decent living conditions actually facilitate the process of development. Certainly the demands of the employees for wage adjustments are justified. The critical question thus becomes: why is government unable to meet such justifiable demands? If we looked critically and honestly at government expenditure patterns, would the anticipated budget overrun be as grave as it appears or as difficult to manage as government leaders claim?

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