

JCTR URGES FOR “FOOD ON THE TABLE” DISCUSSIONS TO BE AS KEY AS POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS

The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) has urged for an equal weight of public discussion around politics and food. “It is obviously the case,” says Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the JCTR Social Conditions Research Project, “that the realm of politics has a strong bearing on national resource allocation including food.” This inevitably demonstrates the need to pay particular attention also to economic issues surrounding people’s well being, especially as it concerns households having access to three meals a day, a situation which is presently lacking in Zambia.

The JCTR monthly *Basic Needs Basket*, a tool for the estimation of the cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka, has once again shown that to survive or indeed to have access to three meals per day for a family of six is the hardest thing to achieve for most households in Lusaka and wider in Zambia, both for households with members in and out of employment.

In its composition, the *Basic Needs Basket* highlights average costs of food items such as mealie meal, beans, kapenta, cooking oil, eggs, meat, vegetables, etc., and essential non-food items such as energy, water, housing wash and bath soap, etc. For the month of May the total cost of the *Basic Needs Basket* amounted to K1,028,650. There is some reduction in the overall cost of food *only* compared to the previous month, mainly due to the reduction in the price of mealie meal which has gone down from an average of K41,800 in April to K36,500 in May.

While the price of mealie meal -- a significant determinant in the overall cost of food *only* -- has dropped mainly because of positive outcomes in the current agricultural season, other food items such as vegetables have shown either some relative stability or some increase compared to last month.

One woman trader of vegetables at one market place in Lusaka, spoke with the JCTR and had this to say about the price of vegetables: “It is usually the case that we experience reductions in the price of vegetables around this time of the year, leading up to the time when it becomes very cold. But this year has not seen any remarkable price reductions of vegetables. Maybe when we start moving towards the hot season.” Average take-home wages continue to be much lower than the estimated needs of households, for example, nurses take-home wages range from K461,000 to K715,000, that of teachers range from K407,000 to K913,000.

While Zambia will experience some positive outcomes in terms of an increased crop harvest, with the positive impact of easing the pressure of rising cost of living, the JCTR urges for a movement from the “poverty of politics” defined in a narrower sense, to “politics of poverty” whose centrality will be issues of human wellbeing, fundamentally food.

Any criteria of judgment of development achievements in the Zambian context must not leave out this key issue of food. “For this reason,” states Peter Henriot, Director of the JCTR, “we look today for genuine leaders of Zambia to speak more about the economic and social issues of the survival of the people than about the political and personal issues of the survival of politicians!”

[For more information, contact Muweme Muweme, Social Conditions Research Project of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection, P.O. Box 7774, Lusaka, Zambia; tel: 260-1-290410; fax: 260-1-290759; e-mail: socialjctr@zamnet.zm; internet: www.jctr.org.zm]