

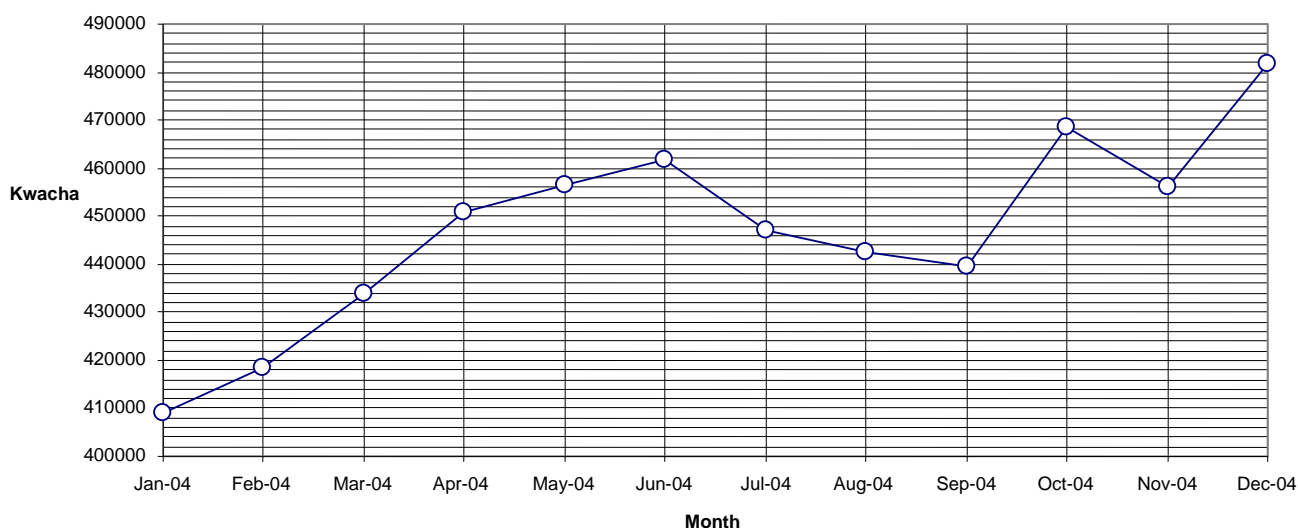
YEAR 2004 ENDS WITH *FOOD ALONE* COSTING K481,540: NEEDS OF PEOPLE SHOULD BE KEY IN POLICY DEBATES IN 2005, SAYS JCTR

Zambia's *longstanding* problem of high cost of living should be one of the top most policy debates in 2005, says the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR). This is because cost of living determines people's general welfare through indicating, for example, how households and individuals relate to education, health, food, shelter, agricultural production, etc. "It is a broad quality of life indicator, as, for example, it primarily determines how many meals a household will have in a given day," says, Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR.

Any claims of improvements in Zambia's economy should be judged by no other criteria than quality of life indicators such as access to good health care and education, adequate food at household level, decline and possibly an absence of street children, adequate incomes, etc. There should be no abstract notions of measuring the performance of the economy -- such as in GDP terms only -- other than the *primacy* of what is happening in people's lives, for example, in nutrition terms.

Undoubtedly, the agricultural output of 2003 and 2004 has yielded many positive results such as keeping inflation -- which hurts the poor most -- in check, enhanced rural household incomes, ensuring adequate food at household level, etc. However, with some steady declines only recorded in the period June to September, cost of food alone as shown by the JCTR monthly *Basic Needs Basket* (BNB), continued to *fluctuate* at a higher level in 2004. December like in the previous years, recorded a significant increase. This trend in cost of food alone reflected also the overall cost of the *Basic Needs Basket* (see graph below).

**Graph showing trends in cost of food alone
for a family of six in Lusaka, 2004**



The JCTR BNB estimates the monthly cost of food items such as mealie meal, beans, green vegetables, cooking oil meat, eggs, etc., and essential non-food items such as housing in medium density area, energy, wash and bath soap for a family of six. In 2004, the average

cost of food alone was K447,153 per month and non-food items K659,016 per month. The average cost for the total BNB (i.e., cost of food and non-food) was K1,106,170 per month.

A comparison of these figures of cost of living -- which do not include the cost of transport, education, health, personal care, etc. -- with net incomes of most households reveals the extent to which most Zambian households have to struggle to meet their essential needs for decent human survival. For example, consider those civil servants looking at a pay cheque frozen because of government's "need to meet the HIPC completion point," those widows breaking stones by the roadside and having to look after so many orphans brought about by the relentless onslaught of AIDS, those households that have to balance between adequate food and meeting the cost of antiretroviral therapy, those households without any access to gainful employment, etc.

A widow of Lusaka had this to say in connection with her socioeconomic situations "I have ten children that I am keeping at my house, five children are my own and five are orphans. I find it very difficult to take care of these children and there is no where to run to. My salary is also below K200,000 and I have to pay rent, take children to school, buy food and do everything else out of this money. I am really suffering!"

What should Zambia do in light of this socioeconomic situation? What should Zambia do to *move people from less human conditions to more human conditions* -- a truer definition of development than abstract GDP figures? It is important that Zambia pays attention to, among other considerations, the following:

- First, Zambia has to ensure that at all levels there is a "responsive and responsible leadership." There is need to *ensure* that the individuals who are supposed to represent the interests of the Zambian people, especially the poor through employment creation, provision of housing, etc., do exactly that. To do this it means that among others things, the new Zambian constitution must incorporate in the Bill of Rights Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for the people to claim their *inherent* right to development.
- Second, recognizing the principle that development can only be achieved through the people themselves and that the people are the real goal of development, Zambia should strive to improve the quality and accessibility of education to all the people. It means building more schools, especially in rural areas to cut on the long distances children have to cover to go to school, addressing what has become a perennial problem of examination paper leakages that is impacting negatively on the purpose of education, improving teacher morale through prompt and adequate remuneration, etc.
- Third, the health problem has long been known to be a wider development problem and this recognition has been laid *bare* more recently with the HIV/AIDS problem. Therefore any strategies at addressing general health and the HIV/AIDS problem must recognize the need to look at the general "workings" of the Zambian economy and ensure that it is responsive to the needs of the majority poor Zambian people, for example, ensuring that households have access to adequate food.
- Fourth, Zambia must strive to attain total debt cancellation. This means strengthening even further the voice calling for total debt cancellation as championed by Jubilee-Zambia. Government, trade unions, Members of Parliament, women groups, the

youth, the church, etc., must continue with their efforts of advocating for total debt cancellation for the purpose of improving living conditions of the Zambian people.

- Fifth, sustainable agricultural practice is what will assure access to income and food at household levels for the majority of the Zambian people. Therefore efforts to find alternative ways to the heavy reliance on chemical fertilizers, coupled with crop diversification, market access both local and international, etc., should be central to the agricultural sector of the Zambian economy.
- Sixth, one of the huge problems Zambia has been facing over the years is unemployment. In an environment of unemployment, people's access to adequate food, health care, education, the fight against poverty, etc., is greatly inhibited. Therefore Zambia needs to have a strategy of employment creation that will show how many and what kind of jobs, for example, are being created annually. This should be a Zambian priority whether or not it pleases foreign interests such as the IMF and World Bank.

The year 2005 will see heightened international focus on poverty through, for example, the review of progress towards the attainment of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed upon by the international community in 2000. It will be particularly important for Zambia and other countries in similar situations to take advantage of this international focus on poverty and ensure that there is commitment from the international community to take pragmatic steps to address the problems of poverty, hunger, HIV/AIDs, trade imbalances, etc.

"The primacy of human considerations in socioeconomic policy should at all times be upheld and one hopes that the 2005 national budget will be seen as an instrument of achieving development and will reflect this fundamental principle," says Muweme.

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