

JCTR BASKET COVERAGE EXPANDED TO INCLUDE LIVINGSTONE, KABWE, NDOLA, LUANSHYA AND KITWE

The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) has expanded its area of coverage of the *Basic Needs Basket* from Lusaka to other areas. The areas to which the *Basic Needs Basket* has been expanded to are Livingstone, Kabwe, Ndola, Kitwe and Luanshya.

"This expansion," says Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR, "was necessitated by the *Basic Needs Basket's* intrinsic value and the demand from the people". There have been several requests for the Basket information from other towns in Zambia and the JCTR could not give the same information of Lusaka to other parts of the country because price data vary depending on many factors.

The expansion follows the feasibility study conducted in 2003 by the JCTR which recommended that the Basket, in the initial phase, be taken to places that have similar characteristics to Lusaka. This means that it assumes the same composition of food and non-food essentials as that of Lusaka. According to Muweme, it is the belief of the JCTR that an expanded *Basic Needs Basket* will be both more representative of the national urban situation of cost of living and more authoritative in respect to discussions on cost of living. As is usually the case with initial efforts, it is expected that there will be more improvements along the way on the collection and accuracy of the information.

A comparative analysis of Luanshya and Lusaka for the month of March reveals that the cost of food alone in Luanshya is higher than in Lusaka. In Lusaka food alone was costing K418,550. In Luanshya it was recorded at K447,100. An analysis done during the feasibility study that informed the expansion of the Basket also revealed Luanshya as the town with a higher cost of food compared to Livingstone, Kabwe, Ndola, and Kitwe. This indeed is a disturbing situation as households facing difficult socioeconomic situations due to low economic activity are at the same time experiencing a higher cost of food. High cost of food has serious health and education implications. It means, among other things, susceptibility to illness, children who are malnourished and who fail to concentrate at school.

In the previous months of January and February, the average cost of mealie meal was highest for Livingstone at K33,500 followed by Luanshya at K32,800. Kitwe recorded the price at K32,150, Ndola at K31,600 and Lusaka at K29,450.

According to Muweme, it must be understood that the Basket is not compiled to be merely a statistical exercise, but a basis for responding to the need for improving lives of the Zambian people, particularly the poor whose composition is by and large women. Its application therefore is by no means restricted to those in formal employment, especially that 80 percent of the Zambian population is living in poverty.

It must also be recognized that high cost of living is an outcome of many problematic situations relating to the wider "workings" of the economy. As such the Basket must also be seen as a basis for entry into exploring socioeconomic policies that will benefit the people through ensuring that they have adequate food, quality health care and education, etc.

Unfortunately, Zambia's development efforts have not given priority attention to the needs of the poor. It is JCTR's strong proposition that as Zambia negotiates a new Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) with the IMF, both government and the IMF assessment teams should assess Zambia's qualification within the context of the needs of the majority poor Zambian people. "How else," asks Muweme, "is Zambia going to effectively and equitably develop without paying attention to the needs of its people?"

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