

JCTR ASKS: WHY DON'T POLITICIANS SPEAK ABOUT WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN PEOPLE'S LIVES?

"Why are our leading politicians disappointing us by not talking about what is important in our lives?" That is the burning question that more and more citizens in Zambia are raising these days, as they face everyday problems of sustaining the livelihoods of their families.

According to Mr. Muweme Muweme, "The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) is worried that the current political debates seem to be very much out-of-touch with the people's needs." Muweme, who coordinates the JCTR's Social Conditions Research Project, notes that the central political focus should be on *policies* to improve people's lives, not on *personalities* that want to get elected or stay in office.

According to the JCTR's November *Basic Needs Basket*, the cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka has continued to fluctuate at a very high level. For food alone, the cost is K456,200, and for non-food essentials, the cost is K658,600. Compared to civil servants' take-home pay that rarely touches the one million kwacha mark, a great gap is revealed between what households *ought* to spend at a minimum level and the actual amount of income at their disposal. "In all honesty and decency, says Muweme, "this should be the number one political issue being discussed today!"

Instead of focusing on the critical question of cost of living – the key in determining people's welfare since it shows how households and individuals relate to food, education and health, shelter, agricultural production, and other welfare indicators -- we hear at one level an immense amount of talk about the reaching the doubtful and ever "floating" HIPC Completion point as though its attainment would automatically guarantee improvements in people's lives.

At another level, the constitutional debate has drawn attention away from this critical question of addressing the high cost of living in Zambia. As much as this constitutional debate is important, it is certainly necessary that it be debated alongside the question of how to improve people's livelihoods.

Muweme asks: "When are we going to hear politicians, both in the ruling party and in the opposition, debate how Zambia is going to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)? How do the politicians plan to create employment for the often-hopeless Zambian youth? What plans do they have for improving the quality of health and education?"

For example, even though it is encouraging to hear the Ministry of Education say that they will employ 1000 teachers, what will happen to those who will remain unemployed? Another example is the support given to small-scale farmers in the form of subsidized inputs. While this has greatly benefited the few farmers who have received this support, much more can and should be achieved with a *prompter* and *wider* supply of inputs.

These burning life-enhancing issues should top the agenda for political discussions. "We should see more headlines in the newspapers about the needs of people than the *wants of politicians*," says Muweme.

The JCTR trusts that the Zambian people, the majority of who are affected by poor living conditions, will make issues concerning their welfare the critical points for deciding who gets elected at any level of future elections. Then politics will really touch the lives of the people!

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