

## INCREASING FOOD PRICES: THE JCTR *BASIC NEEDS BASKET* TELLS IT ALL

The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) says that the *Basic Needs Basket* offers some basis for reflection and subsequent pragmatic action in the on-going debate on increasing global food prices and the extent to which this phenomenon might or is impacting on the Zambian situation, particularly on the impoverished.

As has been observed before, the *Basic Needs Basket* was constructed not to be a mere statistical exercise but as a tool for contributing to the understanding of the dynamics of living conditions of the people seen through cost of food and other essential needs. In capturing prices of food and non-food essential items every month, the *Basic Needs Basket* helps in monitoring fluctuations of prices and finding explanations to those fluctuations with a view to coming up with practical action for sustained affordable cost of living.

The provision of sustained affordable cost of living has historically proved to be a challenge to most African economies. But this challenge will obviously become even more formidable than before given current increases in global and national food prices.

For example, as compared to the cost of basic food for March which stood at K683,700, the cost of basic food in April increased to K742,700, representing an increase of K59,000. In January basic food increased by K26,500, in February by K58,750, March K28,950 and now April K59,000. For April the sources of the increase were mealie meal, beans, kapenta, dry fish, meat, tomato and onion.

The total cost of non-food essentials (charcoal, bath soap, etc) remained relatively stable at K1,197,100 in comparison to the cost of K1,196,600 for the month of March. Beyond just giving us useful insights into the debate on rising food prices these figures are a “concrete measure” about quality of life of people and basis on which to determine national progress. Improved national economy, while paying attention to keeping economic fundamentals right, should ultimately be seen in terms of people’s ability to afford food and other basic essentials. After all, the “economy is the people.”

Central to the debate on increasing global food prices has been the rural and urban implications. The question has succinctly been: Are the increasing food prices to the benefit of the rural populations? “It is true,” says Miniva Chibuye of the Social Conditions Programme of the JCTR, “to observe that high urban food prices could be seen as a way for changing the long-time development lopsidedness that has favoured urban populations and therefore driven rural-urban migration. But one needs to recognise that there are preconditions to be met before rural populations benefit from increased urban food prices. Such preconditions would include improved productive capacities for rural populations, through among others, irrigation schemes that would facilitate off-season crop production of these populations.”

It is hoped that the on-going debate on rising global and national food prices will bring about pragmatic steps of incorporating more the rural populations in national economic activities that will have a double effect of not only reducing cost of urban food prices but also improving food and income security for rural populations. Certainly the monthly *Basic Needs Basket* has always underscored the need for paying attention to those sectors of the economy -- such as agriculture -- that are at the centre of promoting human welfare. To that extent, the JCTR *Basic Needs Basket* tells it all!

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