

BASKET REVEALS DIFFICULT TIMES FOR HOUSEHOLDS DURING END AND START OF THE YEAR: JCTR CALLS FOR NECESSARY STEPS TO ADDRESS SITUATION

The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) has observed that the *unrelenting* high cost of living many Zambian households experience during the end and beginning of each year should not be taken as a *norm* but a challenge that requires pragmatic steps to address the situation and lessen the suffering of the people.

"This observation, " says Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR, "is based on the analysis over the years of the *Basic Needs Basket* information that has shown consistent increases in food and other essential requirements at the end and beginning of each year. For example, in 2004, the cost of *food alone* in Lusaka was K439,400 in September. It moved to K481,540 in December and K492,940 in January 2005. In 2003, the cost of food alone was K384,450 in September. It moved to K401,800 in December and K409,000 in January 2004. Unfortunately, this situation happens when households are under pressure to meet additional costs such as school requirements for their children at the start of each year.

The *Basic Needs Basket* is a simple but concrete monthly estimation of cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka, Livingstone, Kabwe, Ndola, Luanshya and Kitwe. The *Basic Needs Basket* includes the cost of food and essential non-food items such as housing, energy, water, wash and bath soap, etc. For the month of February 2005, the total cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka stood at K1,333,170.

Muweme further says that it is important to realize that while households in the urban areas may only suffer from high cost of food, which is only an accessibility problem, those in the rural areas suffer from both accessibility and availability problems especially at beginning of each year. Those in the rural areas who face food problems during these times of the year not only lack the food at home but also fail to find nearby places from where to buy it.

Therefore, Zambia's approach to strategic reserves needs to be carefully examined with the view to ensuring that the strategic reserves are decentralized to make food both available and accessible to most of the rural households. That food availability and accessibility at the household level has long been identified to be a function of adequate income, production, storage and distribution means, for example, *evenly* spreading strategic reserves around the country. This is one of the strategies of ensuring that households have food all the time as opposed to the current arrangement which seems only to respond to those in urban areas.

Instead of observing the high cost of living and inadequate food supplies at the end and beginning of each year as a *norm* or dismissing it as a way of life, there is need particularly on the part of government to look at both local and international factors giving birth to this situation and finding solutions to these problems.

"It is an all time truth," says Muweme, "that every human being desires to lead a life of full access to food, housing, clothing, education, social inclusion, health, etc., and therefore it becomes the fundamental principle upon which every society's approaches to policy design and response to crisis situations should be based. For any lack of realization of this fundamental principle and the consequential effects is in itself a denial of the humanity that is inherently in each one of us."

JCTR believes that by and large the problems of food accessibility and availability are well known in Zambia. We need strategies, for example, of strengthened awareness creation in rural households of the need to store adequate food coupled with promoting effective and evenly spread storage facilities. We need to encourage formation of transparent and democratically organized cooperatives. It also means going beyond the commendable interim measures put in place by government such as the banning of maize exports and working out long-term measures that will entrench food availability for both rural and urban households.

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