

## JCTR REFLECTIONS ON 2005: IMPROVEMENT OF NATION'S MICRO-ECONOMIC SITUATIONS PARAMOUNT

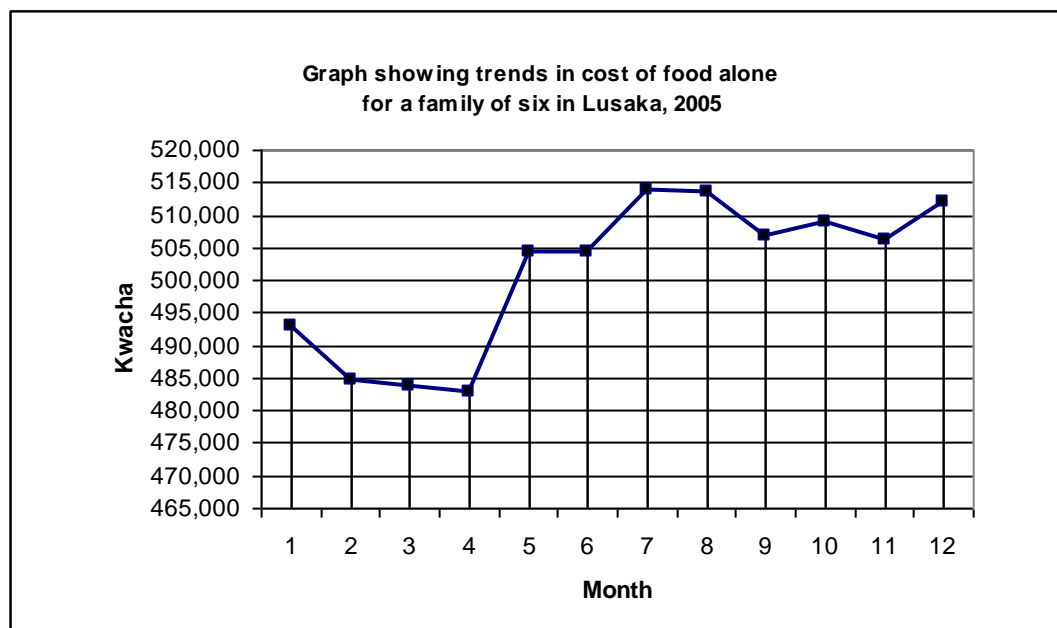
As the Zambian nation moves into 2006, it is imperative to recall once again the need to improve the micro-economic situations of the people which must always run high in our development priorities. The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection strongly believes that some of the positive societal changes occurring in Zambia must be felt at the household level, especially reflected in people's quality of life. That way, we will see a Zambian society with an inclusive development process and a stronger moral fabric.

For Zambia, there is every reason to be optimistic about the future if only some of the inhibiting factors for the movement of people from less human conditions to more human conditions are addressed. With the much talked about huge natural resource endowment of water, land, minerals, peace and the people themselves, Zambia has no reason to remain in the current state where it is hard for its people to meet the minimum standard requirements for decent survival.

As we were concluding December 2005, the JCTR *Basic Needs Basket* measuring cost of food and essential non-food items for a family of six recorded the cost of food alone at K512,100. In November, the cost of food was recorded at K506,150. This means that there was an increase of K5,950 in the cost of food. This increase is attributed to rises in the prices of mealie meal, tomatoes, beans, green vegetables, kapenta, etc. For green vegetables and tomatoes, prices tend to rise during the rainy season because of higher production costs.

Costs of essential non-food items such as housing, water, energy, wash and bath soap were recorded at K856,600 compared to K839,400 in November. There was a significant increase in the price of charcoal packed in a 90Kg bag from K31,400 in November to K40,000 in December, due to production and transportation difficulties that come with the rainy season. Other non-food items such as vaseline, wash and bath soap remained the same in prices as in the month of November.

Trends in the cost of food alone for 2005 showed -- as indicated by the graph below -- a marked increase in the price of food between April and May. These remained relatively high with some minor down and upward changes throughout the rest of 2005.



2005 will also be remembered as a year that saw the start of a long-drawn-out debate on the constitution making process. The unnecessary and continued polarization of the nation on this issue will only work to undermine social cohesion, political focus, and the necessary national sense of purpose required to effectively meet the challenges of development. These challenges include the ability of poor people to meet needs of adequate food, HIV/AIDS, education, health, gender disparities with unjust consequences, crime, prostitution, and the very unfortunate presence and increases in the number of orphans and street children.

But one of the most important elements in relation to meeting some of these challenges is to ultimately reflect in the Bill of Rights -- the heart of the Constitution -- of the new Constitution economic, social and cultural rights. The guaranteeing of these rights under this arrangement we believe will enhance achievement of intended and desired development goals (Millennium Development Goals). *It is of utmost importance that development outcomes are not only dependent on the benevolence of an individual, group or particular government but also on the mandates of a good Constitution.*

In hindsight, it must be acknowledged that there were some great efforts done in 2005 to improve situations of the people. Some of these efforts continue being reflected in government's policy directions. For example, the continued prioritisation of agriculture (as announced by the Republican President) is not only encouraging but is an effort directly related to the welfare or lack thereof of the majority of the Zambian people. Except that these development efforts were affected by negative factors such as the serious fuel shortage of September/October, drought, the HIV/AIDS problem, etc.

Moreover, there is need to move alongside these efforts with a corresponding attention to the pillars of any progress of the people, education and health. It is only through education and good health that a nation can effectively realise its aspirations for development including ensuring that empowerment programmes of those disadvantaged are sustainable.

As we start the year 2006, there are a number of points that need both attention and serious reflection on. They include the following:

- The 2006 national budget must *explicitly* be pro-poor, using available HIPC funds.
- Government should not only strive to pay its workers (teachers, nurses, etc.) adequately but must ensure that wages are paid when they fall due. Certainly the situation of delayed salaries raises serious ethical questions and must not be allowed to continue.
- It is also imperative that the Ministry of labour and Social Security is strengthened both in terms of personnel and resource allocations to effectively carryout national audits pertaining to the conditions under which people are engaged in employment.
- The direction of the Constitution-making process must be in such a way that it must not bring to bear --especially if not dealt with openly and in a non-partisan fashion -- its potential of distracting attention from other important areas of national development
- The coming 2006 elections must seriously be issue-based in regard to what each aspiring candidate or political party at any level is going to do to promote real development in Zambia. There is need for all those who will be aspiring for any political office to orient their discussions and be committed to issues that have a direct bearing on the quality of life of the Zambian people.
- Positive economic developments such as reduction in fuel prices in mid-December and the recent appreciation of the Kwacha must ultimately be felt by those that are living on the margins of sustenance, the poor.

The year 2005 was marked by Zambia's attention to the total external debt cancellation effort (i.e., attainment of HIPC Completion Point) Now that positive developments are happening under this effort, 2006 should be marked by more hard work by the Zambian people and continued prudent national resource management, especially considering that 2006 is an election year. There is a great opportunity to effectively face the important challenge of improving people's lives now that the major impediment to servicing the social sectors and other needy areas has started being removed. We must realise that there should be no excuse to enhanced prudent resource utilisation and national hard work!

"But above all," says Muweme Muweme of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR, "Zambia's development efforts must be seen to be creating positive changes at the micro level, the household and especially the household's relationship to basic needs. Households must be able to adequately meet the needs of food, education, health, etc. That should be the ultimate aim of all national policies and programmes."

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