

JCTR CALLS FOR CLARITY ON MAIZE GRAIN SITUATION

In the current situation where Zambia is experiencing some shortfall in maize grain, it is important that government makes further clarification on the actual grain situation, says the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR). The JCTR makes this call in the midst of mixed statements coming from the media, international offices, government, etc., concerning the maize grain situation.

"As it is well known," says Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR, "availability of accurate information and the right flow of that information are critical ingredients in planning, especially in efforts aimed at avoiding starvation of the people."

According to the JCTR, what we need in our current situation is a comprehensive situational assessment to have full and accurate information on maize grain deficit areas, the actual magnitude of the deficit and when exactly stocks from the previous harvest ran out and how and when any deficits -- national or regional within the country -- will be met. "Without such an approach, Zambia risks putting in place halfhearted measures that might give rise to subsequent crisis responses if the hunger situation turns out to be serious on account of underestimating the grain deficit," further says Muweme.

Realising that the shortfall, whatever its magnitude, is taking place in a context that has a disproportionate relationship between wages and the cost of food and other needs, and where rural communities rely on food production both for consumption and income to meet other needs, the need to have a well functioning food information and distribution system becomes critical.

According to the JCTR *Basic Needs Basket*, a monthly survey of cost of living for a family of six, the cost of a 25 Kg bag of breakfast mealie meal has moved upwards in Lusaka from an average of K33,300 during the month of April to K34,600 in May. The total for the basic food items now stands at K504,430, moving from the cost of K482,820 in April. The increase has been contributed to by an upward adjustment in the price of mealie meal, dry fish and kapenta. The price of mixed cut beef has recorded some slight decrease while other items such as green vegetables, tomatoes and onions have remained the same. The total for the overall cost of the *Basic Needs Basket*, that is the total cost of food and non-food items now stands at K1,352,130 for Lusaka. It has increased by K20,210 from the total cost of K1,331,920 in April. This upward adjustment is coming from increases in food.

Although availability of information and proper distribution mechanisms are important components to addressing food problems, it should be realized that ensuring household food availability requires looking at an array of factors. According to Muweme, in Zambia this would include the question of employment, intra-household assessments, local community participatory frameworks, etc. Paying attention to such factors during times of food deficits will help us to look beyond food output statistics, important as they are, to including analyses that will contribute to household level accessibility and availability of food all the time.

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