

Press Release

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High mealie meal prices are detrimental on poor households

The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) has over the years produced the Basic Needs and Nutrition basket (BNNB) measuring the cost of living for a family of five members. Recent BNNB findings have shown that the cost of living for the Zambian people has been on upward trend over the past months with the year 2019 closing at K6, 620.73 and the year 2020 opening at K7, 410.96. The shift was largely caused by increased electricity tariffs as well as fuel pump prices that are at the heart of any economy. It is therefore rather unfortunate to see this shortage of the country's staple food accompanied by an increase in the commodity's price happening against an already overburdened citizenry. Reports on the shortage of mealie meal in some parts of the country is a great concern to JCTR primarily because mealie meal is the country's staple commodity and any further increases adversely affects the cost of living.

The price of mealie meal has gone up to unimaginable proportion with some parts of the country recording the price of up to K215. While in some places it is ranging between K170.00 and K190.00. The effect on households, most especially poor households remains a threat as increased costs are detrimental for the well-being of individuals. Price distortions as evidenced by high demand for a commodity with limited supply puts pressure on households. Most of the Zambian people will have to effect some adjustments to the already constrained incomes they have. This is bearing in mind that over 71% of employed persons in Zambia are engaged in the informal sector characterised by uncertainty and unsecure livelihoods (Zambia Statistics Agency, Labour Force Survey Report, First Quarter 2019). Households are therefore forced to economise on the quantity and quality of their meals robbing them of dignified livelihood. This in turn affects their access to adequate and nutritious food and compromises the health of the vast majority which in this case are the poor and the marginalised in our society given the poverty levels in our country. Furthermore, this also poses a challenge on the ability of poor households to meet other important non-food expenses such as housing, education and health care. In addition, it also makes it difficult for households with already little or no income access to mobilise savings.

JCTR therefore urges the government to continue closely monitoring and building resilience of authorities such as the Food Reserve Agency to prevent any further shortages. The inability to do so has the potential to cause sustained high prices of the commodity in the long term. Given the high levels of poverty experienced in the country, it is imperative that government increases the allocation of funds towards social protection to cushion the vulnerable households, specifically safety nets programs such as food or income transfer and nutrition programs focused on the poor and the marginalised in our communities. Government must prioritise investment in the agricultural sector, especially in irrigational technologies and in crop diversification to promote drought resistant crops. This will contribute to addressing prolonged dry spells that are becoming a common occurrence in some parts of the country.

This is one of long term measures as our country continues to experience changes in climate and rainfall patterns which have negatively impacted on crops or a farming system that largely rely on rainfall. A special attention must also be given to improving extension services to ensure that there is effective knowledge and skill transference to small scale farmers in appropriate technologies relating to agricultural diversification and irrigation as well as other productive crop and livestock husbandry practices in order to improve general agricultural output and productivity. These measures coupled with an improved marketing system will help to improve the quality of life for the small scale farmers in our country.

Attribute the statement to Father Alex Muyebe – JCTR Deputy Director

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