

WIDENING GAP BETWEEN FOOD BASKET AND SALARIES: WHAT DO POLITICAL PARTY MANIFESTOS HAVE TO OFFER?

As we approach the elections year, citizens will experience attempts by various political parties to articulate or re-articulate their manifestos. The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) shares the view expressed recently by the Federation of Free Trade Unions (FFTU) that Party Manifestos should be made available for scrutiny by workers in particular and citizens in general.

If there is one issue that needs to be taken seriously and deserves attention in Political Party Manifestos, it is living conditions in relation to the widening gap between the food basket and people's incomes.

The JCTR August food basket for a family of six in Lusaka stands at K272,305. This reflects a slight drop from the July figure of K277,475, mainly attributed to the continued drop in the price of mealie meal during this time of the year. However, this does not suggest any improvement in the living conditions of the people. "Standards of living have continued to fall due to the widening gap between people's incomes and the cost of the food basket," observes Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Economic and Social Development Research Project of the JCTR.

As of 31 August 2000, the salary of a Primary School Teacher stood between K110,000 and K150,000; that of a Secretary in the Civil service between K125,000 and K165,000; a Nurse between K125,000 and K175,000; a Police Officer between K100,000 and K180,000. When compared with the cost of the August basket (K272,305), a huge disparity is indeed shown. If we add to the food basket transport, housing, fuel, clothing, education, health care, recreation, etc., the gap would even become much wider.

According to Muweme "this situation offers the Zambian people a major challenge to *critically assess* what is on offer from Political Party Manifestos in terms of meeting the requirements of a food basket which has remained beyond the reach of many."

Any Party Manifesto that does not put the question of enabling people to afford the food basket within its mainstream policy does not reflect the importance of people as key players in an economy. Having access to food is one of the cardinal issues in people's lives as food accessibility or non-accessibility is an indicator of poverty levels and a determinant of people's participation in various activities.

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2000-09-01

September 2000 Basic Needs and Nutrition Basket: Widening Gap Between Food Baskets and Salaries: What do Political Party Manifestos Have to Offer?

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