

HIGH COST OF LIVING SHOULD BE AN ESSENTIAL FOCUS FOR POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS, SAYS JCTR

As the political campaigns for the forth-coming tripartite elections move towards heightened levels, Zambian people continue experiencing worsening hardships in living conditions, says the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR).

If only living conditions could be tackled with the greatest enthusiasm as being exhibited currently during electoral campaigns, there could be greater impact on improving welfare, observes Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Economic and Social Development Project of the JCTR.

The JCTR monthly Food Basket -- that measures cost of living -- for a family of six in Lusaka has highlighted the continued disastrous living conditions in the country. The cost of the Food Basket for the month of November stands at an all-time high of K377, 300.

However, this does not include other essential items that are necessary for human survival and well-being such as housing, electricity, water, clothing, fuel, transport, education, health care, recreation, etc. The current cost of Food Basket indicates a substantial increase of K18,900 from the previous month's cost of K358,400. This increase is mainly attributed to the continued rising cost of mealie meal. The average Lusaka price recorded was K29,100 (up from K17,300 only six months ago), we hear of the price being over K40, 000-K50,000 in other parts of the country!

We also know that the majority of households in Zambia spend most of their income on food. The rise in cost of the Food Basket means that a lot of households will be compelled to reduce the number of meals per day or do away completely with other essential expenditures.

Muweme further says that "Current trends in cost of living raise great fears about the future, particularly that government has allowed the inadequate maize situation to prolong far too long without being effectively and equitably addressed."

In this situation of high cost of living, two issues as a matter of development policy become particularly important now that political parties are busy campaigning. *First*, agriculture and its supportive role to other industries -- mining, manufacturing, etc. *Second*, employment creation with adequate wages.

These two issues are very critical to determining living conditions of the people. Therefore those aspiring to take responsibility of governing this country *must* tell the nation what they will do about agricultural policy and the employment situation.

It is JCTR's strong call that as the country moves towards elections on 27 December, these two important issues will be core in the campaigns of the various political parties and all the respective candidates for President, MPs and Local Government Councillors.

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