

“YES, COST OF LIVING MAJOR PROBLEM AMONG HOUSEHOLDS AND NEEDS VERY SERIOUS ATTENTION”, SAYS JCTR

High cost of living has continued to be a major problem being experienced by many households in Zambia. This obviously means that as government and the rest of stakeholders try to find solutions to Zambia's economic problems, cost of living should be one of the critical points of focus in discussions and policy documents in order to improve people's lives, says the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR).

The JCTR has long identified high cost of living in Zambia as one of the *major* and *consistent* problems the country has experienced. “That is why,” says, Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR, “the JCTR has as one of its activities the *Basic Needs Basket*, which is an effort aimed at giving a picture of the struggle confronting households in meeting their daily essential needs.”

The Basket shows the relationship between household incomes and requirements for basic human survival. It highlights the cost of food and essential non-food items. The Basket is not compiled to be merely a statistical exercise, but a basis for responding to the needs of the Zambian people, particularly the poor whose composition is by and large women.

For the month of October, cost of living as shown by the JCTR Basket is K468,600 *for food alone* compared to K439,400 for the month of September, representing an increase of K29,200. The increase can be attributed to a significant upward adjustment in the price of meat because of the current problem of foot and mouth disease that has resulted in reduced supplies of meat on the market. There were also increases in the price of beans, dry fish, cooking oil, etc. The increase in these items is on account of the upward adjustment in fuel prices that probably has started to take effect after some period of relative price stability.

If non-food essential items such as housing, water, energy, wash and bath soap are added to the cost of food, the total cost for the *Basic Needs Basket* for the same month is K1,127,500. This figure is obviously beyond reach of many Zambian households.

According to Muweme, this situation of high cost of living explains why the Zambian people indicated high cost of living as a serious problem in the recently launched National Governance Baseline Survey (NGBS) by the Republican President.

It is important to recognize that high cost of living has serious off-shoots. It means the nutrition status at household level is negatively affected and results in, for example, inadequate food intake with the effect of malnutrition and stunted growth for children, difficulties in accessing health care and education and it also generally means the absence of the various dimensions of well being.

As Zambia continues to build its efforts around agricultural development, which is so far commendable, it is important for government to realize that to realize the challenge of high cost of living. Thus there must be a *holistic* approach to addressing the problem of high cost of living. It means we must increase investment in sectors such as education and health as well as employment creation. “Doing this,” says Muweme, “as history has taught us, is what will lead to improvements in people's lives. It is also where the future of any country is predicated and Zambia is no exception.”

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