

JCTR CHALLENGES WATER COMPANIES TO MAKE WATER AVAILABLE TO ALL, AS NEW WATER TARRIFFS GREATLY IMPACT THE *BASIC NEEDS BASKET*

The *Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection* has expressed concern over the high cost of water in a number of urban areas across Zambia, a situation which is making water unaffordable to the majority of Zambians, especially the poor. As guaranteed by Article 25 of the Universal Declarations of Human Rights, all households have a right to basic social services, such as water. The failure of some water companies to make water accessible and affordable to all households is one of the most pressing issues in the country, especially as families without a clean source of water are prone to water-borne illness and diarrhoea.

Furthermore, one of the Millennium Development Goals is for Zambia to halve by 2015 the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Chris Petruskis, Assistant in the Social Conditions Research Project, explains, "The JCTR is very concerned about the high cost of water and sanitation in a number of urban areas across Zambia, especially Lusaka, Luanshya and Mongu. According to research carried out during the month of August, the average fixed tariff for medium density households has reached K88,500 within Lusaka, K69,000 within Luanshya and K65,000 within Mongu. With the prevailing high levels of unemployment, typically low wages and high cost of other basic needs, families are finding themselves unable to pay water bills and are being disconnected."

The Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR conducts monthly research on the cost of basic needs within a number of urban areas across Zambia, including Lusaka, Ndola, Kitwe, Luanshya, Kabwe and Livingstone. For the month of August, the cost of the *Basic Needs Basket* stood at K1,421,650 in Lusaka, K1,215,670 in Ndola, K904,790 in Luanshya, K962,010 in Kabwe and K1,198,150 in Livingstone. In Lusaka, decreases in the cost of mealie meal, dry fish and charcoal were more than offset by the increase in the cost of water, with the total *Basic Needs Basket* increasing by about K45,000 between July and August.

According to information obtained from the National Water Supply and Sanitation Council (NWASCO), the newly approved fixed tariff for un-metered medium-cost households in Lusaka is K72,300 per month, an increase of 64% from K44,100. The sewerage charge has remained the same, charged at "30% of water bill." Asked to comment on the revised tariffs, Chelstone residents who were standing in queue to pay their bills raised concern that average households were obviously not consulted in the decision to increase tariffs by such a high percentage. As exclaimed by one woman who teaches at a basic school in Chelstone, "Doesn't Lusaka Water and Sewerage realise that the majority of Chelstone residents are either unemployed or working as Civil Servants? How am I supposed to pay this water bill of K78,000 when I take home about K600,000 per month, I need to pay school fees for my children and so many relatives and buy food for my family!"

The revision of water tariffs is not isolated only to medium-density areas in Lusaka, as captured in one of the monthly interviews the JCTR conducts with households in high-density compounds. "Mwezi wasila sitinakwanitse kulipila manzi ndaba banaikilako ndalama zolipila pa mwezi (This past month we did not manage to pay for water because they increased the monthly water charge)," said one woman in Kalikiliki Compound, referring to the recent increase at the JICA community tap from K3,000 to K5,000. She went on to explain how residents were not consulted or publicly informed of the revision, but only found the attendant at the tap demanding K5,000 rather than K3,000. Other residents found at the tap complained about the quality of services within the compounds, saying that households pay monthly water charges only to receive cloudy water, pay monthly ZESCO bills only to experience daily load-shedding, pay K5,000 per month for waste management only to throw their rubbish in a home-dug pit, pay K8,000 ground rent per month to the council while the council appears to provide no services to the community.

The JCTR raises this issue of high water tariffs in relation to the privatisation process in Zambia, which has largely stripped the councils of a direct responsibility to provide essential services. As Mr. Petrauskis comments, "The privatisation of essential services, especially water, leads to an often unjust situation where people most able to pay receive the most available and highest quality services. For example, look at what is happening within compounds such as Kanyama, Chipata, Bauleni, it is not Lusaka Water and Sewerage leading efforts to make water available to residents. There is little profit to be made from poorer residents within these unplanned settlements, therefore the drilling of boreholes, laying of pipes and setting up of community taps is left primarily to donor agencies. While private water companies are profiting to bring water to those who can pay, many poorer households, within parts of Matero, George, Linda and other compounds, are left without easy access to clean water. NWASCO, the regulatory agency for water in Zambia, must ensure that private companies fulfil their responsibility to provide water to all, especially the poor."

Meanwhile, many residents within Luanshya are also experiencing high water tariffs, leading to a situation where many households are being disconnected. In Luanshya, a town plagued by high unemployment, residents in many neighbourhoods (e.g. Town, Roan, Mpatamatu, etc.) are receiving water bills for K69,000 per month, while other residents (e.g. in Mikomfwa) pay a much more affordable bill. Representatives of Nkana Water and Sewerage promised to look into the situation after a group of concerned marketeers and women's group representatives made a visit to their offices last month.

Other towns that have recently revised tariffs include Mongu and Livingstone. Research conducted by the JCTR has revealed that water and sewerage charges for medium-density households average to approximately K88,500 in Lusaka, K69,000 in Luanshya, K65,000 in Mongu, K70,000 in Livingstone, K45,000 in Ndola, K37,000 in Kitwe, K30,000 in Kabwe and K50,000 in Kasama.

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