

LIFE IN HIGH DENSITY AREAS IS STILL A CHALLENGE DESPITE HIGH ECONOMIC GROWTH, SAYS JCTR

The ultimate objective of any growing economy is to ensure that the welfare of the people is uplifted. However, experience of many developing countries after the eighties (80s) and nineties (90s) has shown that whereas target rates of economic growth were in fact achieved, the 'trickledown' effect in form of poverty reduction, increased employment opportunities, rise in wages and reduction in income inequality was not felt.

Equally, Zambia experienced positive macroeconomic indicators averaging 6.1% during the Fifth National Development Plan (FNDP) period. However, in view of the economic growth the country has enjoyed in the recent years, the issue of economic development has to be analysed. This analysis should take into consideration issues relating to hunger, access to quality health services and opportunities for employment. If all the three have been deteriorating, then it would be illogical to call the result economic development even if per-capita income for instance, doubled.

So far, evidence has shown that despite having recorded commendable progress on the macroeconomic front, there is very little to show in as far as translating into improved household welfare. This situation is particularly challenging for families living in high density areas. Anecdotal evidence collected by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) through its' satellite homes research show that many families find it difficult to meet their household food needs. The satellite homes survey are informal interviews conducted every second month with some families in high density areas of Lusaka. It focuses on various socio economics aspects of life including family health; Education; food consumption; housing, water and electricity; socio-political perceptions and employment. JCTR has been conducting qualitative household surveys in various high density areas of Lusaka such as Kanyama, Kalingalinga, Chainta and Ngombe.

"Generally", said Mr. Oliver Kaonga, Social Conditions Researcher at the JCTR, "the satellite homes survey revealed a harsh reality that amidst the positive macroeconomic indicators recorded, at best the quality of life for most people has remained low".

The survey showed that among the households interviewed, most of them only afforded an average of two meals a day while others could only afford less than that. "For instance, one family of five in Kalingalinga compound headed by a female who fends for the family through crushing and selling stones only managed evening meals for the whole month of January 2011", said Mr. Kaonga.

It has long been established that hunger does not only lead to lower productivity but also weakens the body's immune system to fight infections, thus exposing the same category of people to diseases. This household challenge to accessing adequate food needs is further exacerbated by reduced access to quality health service delivery. For instance, almost all the families interviewed in the satellite homes research bemoaned the inadequate drugs at various health centres. These households reported that they mostly buy the required medicine from the drug stores. Health care provision is cardinal for sustenance of a long and healthy life and the quality of the service confirms why Zambia is one of the least ranked countries on the Human development index with an estimated value of 0.395 for 2010.

Additionally, while it is generally true that a high economic growth entails greater output of goods and services, which require an increase in the employment levels of the factors of production, labour included, all the families interviewed had at least one member who was either underemployed if not unemployed. This confirms that the rate of growth strategy is by itself an inadequate device to

deal with the problems of employment opportunities and for reducing economic disparities. Much depends on the composition of the growth process and how growth is financed as well as how benefits from the growth process are distributed. For a developing economy such as ours, efforts must be directed at accelerating growth in the areas which will help raise the employment elasticity of GDP among them agriculture, tourism and manufacturing which are not only labour intensive but also do not always require huge capital investments making it possible for local investors with limited capital to venture in. This will lead to the creation of the much needed job opportunities for the Zambians, and will further ensure that Job creation commensurate with the gains registered from economic growth which is one of the almost certain ways to bridge the gap between economic growth and poverty reduction.

The preliminary findings from the 2010 Census report indicated that Zambia's population living in towns and cities increased from 35% to 39%. It is therefore a sad reality that the living conditions for the poor majority in urban areas keeps on deteriorating despite the recorded economic growth. According to Mr. Kaonga, 'now that Zambia is doing well economically, which is a pre condition to economic development, the challenge still remains of establishing clear and practical mechanisms of transmitting this growth into improved human welfare so as to improve the living standards of the Zambian people'.

[For more information, contact Social Conditions Programme of the JCTR, P. O. Box 37774, Lusaka, Zambia; tel: 260-211-290410; fax: 260-1-290759; e-mail: jctr@jesuits.org.zm; internet: www.jctr.org.zm

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