

BNNB Statement

7th March, 2023

MESSAGE FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY: EMBRACE EQUITY IN ADDRESSING THE COST OF LIVING

The cost of living for a family of five, as measured by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) Basic Needs and Nutrition Basket (BNNB) for the month of February 2023 in Lusaka, stood at K9,278.06. This reflects a K230.75 increase from the K9,047.31 recorded in February, 2023. The upward movement in the basket is attributed to increased prices in food items such as 14kg of other fruits which went up by K320.82 from K108.75 (K7.77/kg) to K429.57 (K30.68/kg), 16kg bananas which went up by K90.26 from K226.90 (K14.18/kg) to K317.16 (K19.82/kg), 1kg kapenta which went up by K88.68 from K267.99 (K267.99/kg) to K356.67 (K356.67/kg), 6kg cassava flour which went up by K66.34 from K65.04 (K10.84/kg) to K131.38 (K21.90/kg) and 4kg rice which went up by K24.15 from K97.65 (K122.07/5kg) to K121.80 (K152.25/5kg). The non-food basket item of particular interest noted a significant decrease in the price of two, 90kg bags of charcoal, which dropped by K313.33 from K1,090 (K545.00/90kg bag) to K776.67 (K388.33/90kg bag), which amongst other factors could partially be attributed to the reduced load shedding in the country.

The JCTR observes that during the month under review, the Energy Regulation Board pump price of petroleum products rose significantly¹ while the local currency continued to depreciate against major currencies such as the dollar. Furthermore, the month of January saw an increase in mealie meal prices, which resulted in an increase in the prices of substitutes such as rice and cassava flour in the month of February. It is worth noting that the prices of other fruits, such as mango, apple, orange, and guava (price based on the cheapest fruit in a given season), increased as mangoes went out of season. JCTR remains concerned about the high cost of living. Women and girls continue to bear the brunt of the impact of rising cost of living. This becomes especially important as the JCTR prepares to join the rest of the world in commemorating International Women's Day.

JCTR recognises that women continue to play an important role in economic development. However, despite them comprising more than 50 percent of Zambia's population, women and girls still lag behind their male counterparts in terms of economic, social and political participation. They continue to face high levels of poverty and several obstacles that limit their development and ability to withstand current crises such as climate change, COVID-19, public debt and, in this case, high living costs.

Financial and insurance exclusion are among the most pressing challenges that women face. In Zambia for example, approximately 67.9 percent of women are financially included, in comparison to 71.2 percent of men². Statistics from the 2021 Labour Force Survey highlight that there are more

¹ Petrol and low sulphur diesel rose by 11.15 and 10.63 percentage points respectively

² Bank of Zambia. (2020). Finscope 2020 Survey Topline findings.

employed males than females at 60.5 percent and 39.5 percent at national level, respectively. In cases where women have access to livelihood opportunities, their engagement with the labour market continues to be restricted by their caring responsibilities which impedes their ability for personal development. As a result, women are frequently ill equipped to withstand the high cost of living because they have less financial capacity to afford the basic needs and services required for their well-being.

As an institution with a strong focus on social justice, JCTR believes that embracing equity at all levels of national planning and budgeting is critical in alleviating poverty and arresting the rising cost of living, which disproportionately affects women and girls. It goes without saying that women's representation in parliament and the cabinet is low and needs to be improved. It is also critical to address the underlying issues and misconceptions that disadvantage female political actors at the community level. More women in various decision-making positions will ensure gender responsive budgeting, which is critical for social justice. Pope Francis says that “a society that is unable to put women in her [rightful] place does not move forward”. In this regard, we believe that the nation will remain stagnant as long as women lack access to opportunities, skill development, political power, and a general lack of gender sensitive policy formulation.

On this basis in commemoration of International Women's Day, JCTR recommends the following measures:

1. Government must address the cost-of-living head on by increasing the minimum wage and increasing social protection allocations. Targeted policies to assist vulnerable populations, including women, are important in cushioning the impact of current economic turmoil.
2. Government must urgently confront the rising cost of fuel as soon as possible by expediting bilateral agreements with cheaper sources. Fuel price increases invariably have a cascading effect on the prices of other essential goods and commodities, affecting people's lives.
3. While contractionary fiscal policy is critical for containing inflationary pressure, the government must continue to assist (through an enabling environment) the local private sector, particularly small and medium-sized businesses, in ramping up production.
4. Government must implement gender responsive budgeting. This is important in ensuring that fiscal policy responds to the actual needs of women and girls. This can be accomplished by tackling illicit financial flows that continue to limit government's ability to implement gender equity and equality programs. By ensuring this, in addition to corporations paying their fair share, more revenue can be salvaged for gender sensitive social sector spending, which is critical for protecting women from economic crises such as a high cost of living.
5. Government, through the Gender Division, must address the political context at lower levels to attend to the numerous issues that make women more disadvantaged candidates than their male counterparts.

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