

JCTR CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND LABOUR MARKET POLICY

Reacting to the launch of the National Employment and Labour Market Policy, the JCTR wishes to extend a strong encouragement to all stakeholders, especially government, to begin immediately implementing the policy. The theme of "Increasing Employment with Decent Working Conditions" brings out the two underlying goals of the policy: 1) to see more Zambians actively engaged in a wide variety of employment ventures, and 2) to ensure that the quality of all employment within the country ensures safety, equity, security and development.

Improvement in the livelihood of Zambian households depends not only upon how many new jobs are created, but on what type of jobs are created and who the main beneficiaries are. It is therefore worrisome that in explaining the importance of the newly developed policy, the Honourable Minister of Labour and Social Security (MoLSS) Mutale Nalumango mainly dwelt upon the first goal of increasing employment in the country without expressing comparable concern for the quality and conditions of employment across the country.

Commenting on the first goal of employment creation, the JCTR particularly agrees with the policy's strong focus on support of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), on promotion of the agricultural sector by increasing accessibility of irrigation, micro-credit facilities, out-grower schemes, cooperatives and extension services, and on development of entrepreneurial and informal sector skills of the youth through improved rural and urban-based training opportunities (e.g., Technical, Vocational and Entrepreneurial Training (TEVET), etc.).

However, the JCTR expresses concern that the strategies within the newly launched National Employment and Labour Market Policy may not be prioritised within key planning frameworks such as the 2006 National Budget, the Fifth National Development Plan and the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) for 2006-2008. For example, the priority strategy to increase employment in agricultural-related industries is not clearly reflected in the recently finalised MTEF for 2006-2008. Whereas the budgets for the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Finance and National Planning are designed to increase by nearly 50% each between 2005 and 2008, the much smaller budget for the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives is only given a modest increase of 7% over these same years. For the majority of Zambians, those depending upon small-scale agriculture to meet basic needs, increased investment in agricultural initiatives provides the greatest hope for reducing poverty at household level! Clear strategies to increase employment, such as providing micro-credit to small-scale farmers, will undoubtedly fail unless the National Budget reflects these same priorities.

Commenting on the second goal of improving conditions of work in Zambia, the JCTR commends the policy for outlining strategies to safeguard workers' rights (i.e., by ending forced and child labour, by curbing workplace discrimination, by ensuring freedom of association, etc.), to improve working conditions (through protection of wages, regulation of safety and health, etc.), to increase the productivity and quality of employment through a focus on education and skills training, and to ensure social protection to all formal and informal sector workers.

Government, both as a regulatory body and as a major employer, must lead the effort to improve the quality of employment in the country, by:

- 1) Increasing resource allocation to the poorly funded MoLSS, in order to increase its ability to attest contracts, settle labour disputes, perform workplace inspections, establish a labour market databank, etc, for the betterment of Zambian workers nationwide.

- 2) Improving conditions of service for all government employees, especially those in key social service sectors (healthcare, education, police, etc.), in order to improve productivity and morale of public servants, to curb the movement of highly trained workers from Zambia to places abroad, and to set a positive example for all employers in Zambia.

3) Amending outdated labour laws that leave nearly every employee in a state of vulnerability. The JCTR recently submitted a detailed position paper to the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, which outlines 13 recommendations for revision of the labour laws in order to uplift the human dignity of all employees and to promote the common good of the nation. These include:

1. Establishment of a just minimum wage tied to the cost of basic needs across the country (establishing Poverty Datum Lines), with exemptions provided only to new or other small employers who honestly cannot pay over K1,000,000 per month to each and every worker.
2. Prohibition of the casualisation of labour, an illegal and unjust employment strategy used to minimise investment in Zambian employees.
3. Establishment of a mandatory gratuity at the termination of all short-term employment, to ease transition of workers from one job to another.

It is time that all employers are challenged on the notion that the only variable of total operational costs that can be minimised is the cost of hiring labour, especially the poorest-paid labour! Private sector interest groups, those who spread fear that higher wages for the average worker would cause inflation and higher unemployment, do not have the common good of the Zambian people at heart.

As Vice-President Lupando Mwape commented during the policy launch, we must see our workers as fellow human beings, and we must be honest about what we can afford to pay to our employees.

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