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BNNB Statement

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The High Cost of Living Undermining Human Dignity

The beginning of the year 2024 has been marked by a deepening crisis as previously anticipated by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) in December 2023. This crisis repeatedly poses a threat to human dignity which underscores the significance and worth of every individual. JCTR expresses concern over the escalating burden of living expenses, which directly undermines our core values. It is crucial to recognize that having a life where individuals can afford their basic needs such as food and shelter is a cardinal aspect of human dignity.

Based on the JCTR's Basic Needs and Nutrition Basket (BNNB) survey for a family of five, there has been an increase in the cost of living for households in Lusaka. The BNNB now stands at K9,555.53, which represents a rise of K398.12 compared to the month of December 2023, which stood at K9,157.41. These significant increases were observed in both food prices and non-food categories, exacerbating the challenges faced by individuals and families, especially in the low-income category. The upward movement in the basket is driven by commodities such as charcoal, whose price increased from K391.67/90 kg bag to K461.67/90 kg bag on account of seasonality. Among food items, the price of kapenta has risen to K308.25 per 1kg, from K245.44 per 1kg. Similarly, the cost of cooking oil has increased from K115.00 for a 2.5 litre container to K125.42 for the same quantity. Additionally, over the last four months, there has been a sustained increase in the prices of commodities like potatoes, chicken, and vegetables. Directly tied to a specific production process, this has been marked by either higher cost of imported inputs for items like chicken feed, exacerbated by increasing transportation expenses as well as driven by increased fuel prices. However, there is a silver lining as the average prices of bananas have decreased from K16.28/kg to K15.16/kg.

Based on the Church's Social Teaching (CST) which provides the basis of our foundational values at JCTR such as social justice, preferential option for the poor and the common good, it becomes evident that the issue of escalating living costs transcends mere numbers. The suffering caused by the rising cost of living goes to the core of an individual's sense of self-worth and questions our commitment as a nation to improving the livelihoods of the poor as spelt out in the 8th National Development Plan. We have witnessed how moments of crisis like Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the cholera epidemic exacerbate pre-existing inequalities, pushing already struggling communities to a far worse position. The significance of prices for goods cannot be overstated, as they directly affect families' access to basic essentials. These families often find themselves grappling with difficult choices, having to decide between putting food on their tables and addressing other urgent necessities. This predicament creates hardship and undermines the dignity of individuals, as they are denied their right to lead fulfilling lives that honour their value and that enable them to thrive.

Furthermore, the unpredictable rainfall patterns witnessed in recent months pose a threat to an already dire situation, which might result in increased food prices. It is crucial for the Zambian government to recognize the urgency at hand and to begin formulating strategies for providing relief for its citizens, especially the poor, who are already burdened by the high cost of living.

Given the severity of this situation, it is crucial that immediate and decisive steps are taken to address both the escalating living costs, made worse by a complex array of issues, with the most pressing being energy (fuel costs) and foreign exchange risks due to the nation's dependence on imports. Consistent with principles that underscore dignity, social justice, and environmental stewardship, the Centre strongly underscores the need for the following actions:

1. ***Support for Low Income Households:*** The Zambian government should prioritise targeted support programs aimed at alleviating hardships faced by low-income households. This can be achieved through meaningful and robust social safety nets that ensure access to necessities, for every individual.
2. ***Ethical Price Control Measures:*** To prevent individuals from being exploited through frequent commodity price adjustments, it is imperative for the government to enforce price control measures. By monitoring and regulating prices of goods we can protect consumers and safeguard their well-being. In the same vein, it is critical that the Energy Regulation

Board works towards establishing long-term policy stability in the energy sector. Frequent reviews of fuel pump prices for instance, can contribute to uncertainty. It cannot be overemphasised that creation of a more predictable regulatory environment can promote stability and attract investment.

3. ***Currency Management:*** The government's priority should be to ensure stability by implementing policies and strategies for managing currency. By efficiently managing pressures and stabilising the value of the Kwacha against convertible currencies we can create an environment that supports sustainable development while also protecting the dignity of individuals.

Addressing the challenges arising from living costs, pandemics, epidemics, and unpredictable rainfall patterns calls for a collaborative effort involving state and non-state actors through honest and open dialogues and consultations in order to collectively formulate strategies that foster economic transformation, social justice, environmental sustainability, and human dignity for all members of the society.

The JCTR remains steadfast in its commitment to upholding the principles of the Church's Social Teaching and to advocating for the dignity of every individual. We therefore implore the government to urgently address the rising cost of living, to take decisive actions to alleviate the prevailing suffering, and to endeavour to build a society that places a high value on dignity for everyone.

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“A JUST ZAMBIAN SOCIETY GUIDED BY FAITH, WHERE EVERYONE ENJOYS FULLNESS OF LIFE”