

# The Basic Needs Basket and the Catholic Social Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) has been monitoring the rising cost of living in various parts of Zambia. This work is done through a survey called the Basic Needs Basket (BNB).

The BNB is an accurate monthly survey that shows the bare minimum cost of essential food and non-food items needed by an average sized family to live a decent and healthy lifestyle. It is truly a minimum, excluding additional everyday costs such as education, transport, healthcare and clothing.

The table below show the results of a recent BNB conducted in March 2011 for Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia.

## **JCTR *BASIC NEEDS BASKET*: LUSAKA**

**March 2011**

### **(A) COST OF BASIC FOOD ITEMS FOR A FAMILY OF SIX IN LUSAKA**

<b>Commodity</b>	<b>Kwacha</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Total</b>
Mealie meal (breakfast)	49,300	3 x 25 Kg bags	147,900
Beans	8,700	2 Kgs	17,400
Kapenta (Siavonga)	100,300	2 Kgs	200,600
Dry Fish	100,000	1 Kg	100,000
Meat (mixed cut)	28,700	4 Kgs	114,800
Eggs	8,400	2 Units	16,800
Vegetables (greens)	4,400	7.5 Kgs	33,000
Tomato	5,200	4 Kgs	20,800
Onion	8,000	4Kgs	32,000
Milk (fresh)	14,200	1 x 2 litres	14,200
Cooking oil	29,300	2 x 2 litres	58,600
Bread	4,200	1 loaf/day	129,000
Sugar	6,300	8 Kgs	50,400
Salt	3,200	1 Kg	3,200
Tea (leaves)	9,700	1 x 500 g	9,700

Sub-total

K945, 400

**(B) COST OF ESSENTIAL NON-FOOD ITEMS**

Charcoal	83,600	2 x 90 Kg bags	167, 200
Soap (lifebuoy)	3,100	10 tablets	31,000
Wash soap (Boom)	4,300	4 x 400 g	17,200
Jelly (e.g., Vaseline)	8,000	1 x 500 ml	8,000
Electricity (medium density)	130,000	300 units	130,000
Water & Sanitation (med - fixed)	210,000		210,000
Housing (medium density)	1,500,000		1,500,000
<b>Sub-total</b>			<b>K2, 063,400</b>
<b>Total for <i>Basic Needs Basket</i></b>			<b>K3, 008,800</b>

\*Note that the cost of housing has not been adjusted because research and consultations are still ongoing

Totals from previous months	Mar 10	Apr 10	May 10	Jun10	Jul 10	Aug 10	Sept 10	Oct 09	Nov 10	Dec 10	Jan 11	Feb 11
Amount	2,771,930	2,778,680	2,798,580	2,799,280	2,809,480	2,828,780	2,850,680	2,877,830	2,861,480	2,879,430	3,019,100	2,982,350

**(C) SOME OTHER ADDITIONAL COSTS**

Item	Kwacha	Item	Kwacha
Education		Transport (bus fare round trip):	

Grades 8-9 (User+PTA/year)	K350, 000 – K470, 000	Chilenje-Town	K6, 000
Grades 10-12 (User+PTA/year)	K600, 000 – K900, 000	Chelston-Town	K7, 000
School Uniform (grades 8-12)	K90, 000 – K200, 000	Matero-Town	K5, 400
Health (clinic)		Fuel (cost at the pump)	
3 Month Scheme (per person)	K5, 000	Petrol (per litre)	K7, 639
No Scheme Emergency Fee	K5, 500	Diesel (per litre)	K6, 999
Mosquito Net (private)	K30, 000 – K120, 000	Paraffin (per litre)	K5, 030

**(D) SOME COMPARATIVE FIGURES OF WAGES--"TAKE HOME PAY"**

	Teacher	Nurse	Guard with Security Firm	Secretary in Civil Service	Average Monthly Income in Urban Low-Cost Area - CSO	Pieceworker on a Farm
<b>Pay Slip</b>	K1,300,300 to K2,200,600	K1,300,000 to K3,450,000	K250,000 to K850,000	K1,390,500 to K1,900,000	645,326 (between October 2004 and January 2005)	K5,000 to K15,000 per day

*This survey was conducted on 26 & 27 March 2011 by the Social Conditions Programme of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection. Average prices were calculated on the basis of prices gathered from retail outlets at Northmead, Shoprite (Kafue Road), and City Market, Chawama, Chainta, Kabwata, Matero and schools, clinics/hospitals around Lusaka. The March Basic Needs Basket is approximately **US\$638 based** upon an average middle exchange rate of 4717 Kwacha per US\$ at the end of March.*

It can be seen from the information above that for the month of March in 2011 the total BNB is K 3,008,800 (US\$638). However, average salaries for teachers are pegged at K1,300,300 (about US\$200). Similarly, nurses and secretaries employed by the government earn about K,1,300,000.

Clearly these categories of workers cannot meet all the basic needs according to the Basic Needs Basket figures. The above situation explains other data which indicates that Zambia is ranked in the top ten of countries with the highest numbers of malnutrition and that 45% of the children in Zambia are stunted.

Zambia, situated in the Southern part of Africa with a population of 13 million, is potentially one of the richest countries in Africa. However, though rich in natural and mineral resources it has some of the poorest people in the world, ranked 150 out 169 countries by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In spite of the fact that the economy has been performing well with an average growth of 5% in the last ten years or so, many Zambians remain poor with up to 64% classified as poor and only 500,000 employed in the formal sector out of a total labour force of 5,000,000.

This situation can surely be referred to as a failure to uphold and promote a dignified life for many Zambians. This scenario is what motivates the JCTR to strive to highlight the plight of the poor and advocate for measures to address the suffering of the people through the BNB.

Since 1996, the BNB has been conducted on a monthly basis. The survey is carried out in thirteen (13) towns across the country and six (6) rural areas. The BNB assesses the cost of food and non-food items as can be seen above. The survey shows the bare minimum cost of living for an average family size in Zambia, estimated to be six.

In what follows I will illustrate how the JCTR goes about highlighting these kinds of scenario and advocating for the improvement of the living standards of the people. I will first link the BNB to some Catholic Social Teaching principles and values. I will then show how the BNB is used in advocacy work. This will be followed by some examples of the impact of the BNB in Zambia and then end with a conclusion.

## **1. The Basic Needs Basket and the Catholic Social Teaching**

The inspiration behind the regular survey of the BNB is drawn from the mission statement of the JCTR. The JCTR, a project of the Zambia-Malawi of the Society of Jesus, popularly known as Jesuits, states its mission as an attempt to ‘promote from a faith inspired perspective a critical understanding of current issues.’

The JCTR was founded in 1988 to examine the Zambian reality from a theological perspective and to undertake appropriate research and action in a spirit of a faith that seeks justice. This faith draws its principles from scripture, the teaching of popes, theologians and Episcopal conferences. Specifically, in carrying out the BNB survey the JCTR draws heavily upon the Church’s social wisdom found in its Social Teaching.

The Church's Social Teaching (CST) is a collection of teachings from the Christian tradition that provides guidance on how the actions of individuals and groups, local and national leaders, government and non-governmental actors and others, should contribute to the shaping of just societies, economies, political and legal systems, communities, etc.

A number of values emanate out of CST, providing a basis for reflection and reflective action. It teaches us about the inherent *human dignity* of all as persons created in the image of God and living in community. CST further guides us that development is "...the transition from less human conditions to those which are more human" (John Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967). Other values are solidarity, human rights and the respect for the integrity of creation.

Some of the principles and values guiding the BNB are the promotion of human dignity, the right to food, employment, the need to provide just wages and the option for the poor. In all this the JCTR attempts to work for the promotion of the fullness of life (John 10:10).

## **2. Catholic Social Teaching values and the Basic Needs Basket**

The work of the JCTR is guided by the Church's social teaching which places heavy emphasis human dignity in community. The BNB is designed to measure whether an average Zambian household can afford the minimum needs to achieve a life of dignity, and whether true development is taking place as these basic needs are becoming more or less affordable. Consequently, the BNB in highlighting the plight of the poor and raising their concerns is guided by the following values.

*Dignified life*

The preceding section has demonstrated that the important dimension added to the BNB approach is grounding it within CST, which recognises most essentially the dignity of every person. CST takes as its entry point into policy formulation a belief in the *fundamental dignity of every human person*. This is a scriptural teaching found in Gen. 1:27 that states that human beings are "made in the image and likeness of God."

It follows that every woman and every man has basic rights and corresponding duties. These are inalienable and are not the consequence of benign state action but rather of generous creative endowment. In *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII reminds us that:

"Any well-regulated and productive association of human beings in society demands the acceptance of one fundamental principle: that each individual is truly a person, endowed by nature with intelligence and free will.

As such he or she has rights and duties, which flow together as a direct consequence from this human nature. These rights and duties are universal and inviolable, and therefore inalienable." (PT 9)

The state has the obligation to protect, foster and promote human rights. This belief in the fundamental dignity of every human person requires not only that people are treated in ways that reflect and respect their inherent dignity, but also that every policy, every programme and every priority must be measured and evaluated by whether it enhances or diminishes human life and dignity.

The BNB helps us to assess whether this is happening or not by considering whether Zambians are truly accessing some of the basic needs of life that will contribute to the realisation of their rights and as well as the ability to live a dignified life.

*Just wages*, MM, 71; QA, 13

"In the first place, the wage paid to the workingman must be sufficient for the support of himself and of his family.

Every effort must therefore be made that fathers of families receive a wage sufficient to meet adequately ordinary domestic needs." QA, n4

Results of BNB are employed in advocating for just wages in Zambia. Many trade unions look forward to the publication of the JCTR BNB in order to have a good basis to bargain for increased wages. Some embassies also look to the BNB to fix wages for their employees.

*Option for the poor*, QA, 137; OA, 23; MM, 20; MM 71; SRS 42

“Today given the world-wide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love or preference for the poor, and the decisions that inspire it in us cannot but embrace immense multitudes of the hungry and needy...” SRS 42

As has been pointed out above the majority of Zambians are poor. The BNB clearly shows that these people are failing to meet even their basic essentials. The BNB then becomes an avenue through which the interests and needs of the poor are exposed in order to draw attention to the plight.

*The right to food* (PT, 26)

‘Beginning our discussion of the rights of man, we see that every man has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are necessary and suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services.’

Food is not just a basic need. According to many international human rights instruments the right to food is a fundamental human entitlement. The CST teaching has joined the rest of humanity in recognizing that the right to food is another element of the body of rights due to human beings by virtue of their God endowed dignity.

*Universal destination of earthly goods*, MM, 43; GS 69

“God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human being and people.” GS, 69

A country like Zambia that is endowed with many natural resources cannot be excused for not ensuring that all those living within its borders are afforded unfettered access to all the goods of the earth found underneath its soil and those that can be extracted from above. The BNB helps to amplify this message but pointing out that the goods of the earth are not reaching every corner of the country and every section of the society.

*Improvement in the standard of living*, MM, 160, 187

‘... nations which enjoy a high degree of economic wealth helping the nation not so well provided, so that they may effectively raise their standard of living.’ MM, 160.

To lift millions of people out of poverty in Zambia implies to improve their living standards. Pope John XXIII urged nations which are economically advanced to help less developed nations. Using this principle we at the JCTR strive to draw attention to those who are poor,

weak and vulnerable and urge key stakeholders in the country to come to their aid so as to improve their living standards.

### **3. The Basic Needs Basket and Advocacy**

Results of the BNB are very often employed in advocacy work at the JCTR. The JCTR advocacy strategy on basic needs has relied heavily upon collaboration with key strategic stakeholders, e.g., trade unions, NGOs, donors, government officials, community leaders, etc.

It is a useful mechanism by which we capture a glimpse or snapshot into the socio-economic situation of a selection of towns in Zambia. Invariably, this snapshot reveals the suffering of the majority. In line with the mission of the Centre which is modeled on the mission of Jesus Christ, Luke 4:18, the JCTR undertakes to advocate on behalf of the people of Zambia. This is also in keeping with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council which urges us all to take up the interests and concerns of all those who suffer in one way or another (*The Church in the Modern World*, n1).

The BNB which also highlights the gap between the cost of living and the typical income of ordinary families is employed when advocating for change, social justice, better economic policies, etc.

### **5. Impact of the BNB**

The BNB is one simple tool that accurately exposes the prevailing living conditions of people, facilitates deeper reflection on the underlying causes of injustice and inspires value-driven action in the promotion of justice.

It has evolved as an important tool for monitoring social and economic progress or indeed the absence of the same. Several important positive effects of the BNB inspired advocacy have been recorded in Zambia.

The following examples illustrate some successful stories of the application of a faith inspired and CST guided BNB as an advocacy tool.

#### **a. Revision of the income tax threshold**

Due to the long standing cry from the JCTR, trade unions and other concerned groups that it was unethical to tax extremely poor households, i.e., households unable to afford basic food items, the pay as you earn (PAYE) tax exemption threshold was raised to K500,000 in 2007 and K600,000 in 2008. It has since been revised to K 800,000 in 2010. The revision correlated closely with the cost of essential food items on the BNB.

#### **b. Wage negotiations**

In any given month at least 3 to 5 trade union officials contact the JCTR to request for the latest BNB, and two big union bodies have for a long time helped disseminate the BNB to their affiliates. The main teacher's union has used the BNB to achieve annual increments of over 15% for government teachers each of the past few years.

**c. Input into a government commission to review Public Sector workers wages**

Another success story took place last year (2010) when Cabinet Office invited JCTR to testify at the President mandated “salary review commission” for civil servants. The invitation letter specifically mentioned that the BNB analysis since the 1990s should be provided in relation to the minimum wage and salaries.

**d. Reduction in high cost of living**

During a workshop held with marketeers, those men and women who earn a living through trading and hawking, it emerged that one of the factors contributing to the high cost of food in Livingstone, in Southern Zambia, was the high transport costs faced by marketeers transporting their goods across town from the wholesale market to respective retail markets in the communities. The local field researcher for the JCTR, working in cooperation with a local Councillor managed to introduce the BNB into a full council meeting, which helped convince the authorities to allow the operation of buses in Livingstone in order to facilitate not only cheaper transportation, but cheaper food prices for the residents.

**e. Use in judicial processes**

The BNB has been successfully used in judicial processes where individuals have sought to have a realistic determination of what sum of money would be sufficient for family support. This has happened on two occasions where a man seeking separation from his wife used the BNB to help the court determine the support he was to render to his former wife. Similarly, a woman in the Southern Province of Zambia used the BNB figures to ask the court to determine a reasonable figure as family support in a case where her relative sought the help of the court to ask her estranged husband to pay monthly family support.

**6. Conclusion**

Over the years, since the JCTR has been conducting the BNB the living conditions of the majority of people in Zambia have been deteriorating. This has been happening in spite of the fact that in recent times the economy has been growing by an average of 5% every year.

The BNB survey has emerged as an important tool for conducting lobbying and advocacy initiatives that are evidence-based. It is one simple tool that exposes the prevailing living conditions of people, facilitates deeper reflection on the underlying causes of injustice and inspires value-driven action in the promotion of justice.

Its use is truly turning out to be an effective way of ensuring that all our brothers and sisters enjoy their God endowed dignity as well as meet, at the very least, the basic requirements to lead a full life. In this way, it truly is an example of 'best practices' of the use of and power of CST in influencing the lives of people and power policy.