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Policy Brief

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**ZAMBIA'S POVERTY ERADICATION:
WHY AND WHAT SET OF PRINCIPLES?**

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Introduction

Why do we have so much poverty around us, particularly in our African countries? What factors contribute to this situation? Do we accept this situation? If not, how do we address this problem? What set of principles or guidelines should we follow towards poverty eradication? And is it meaningful to speak today of “poverty eradication”? There are many people in Zambia, around Africa and around the world who seriously question the use of the term “poverty eradication.” Is this something realistic, feasible, possible, achievable, doable?

Furthermore, there are many people who question whether churches really have anything significant to contribute to meeting the challenge of poverty over and beyond prayers and the works of charity. Should opinions and inputs of churches be taken seriously in the policy debates and decisions surrounding the response to poverty?

This *Policy Brief* from the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) considers that two important questions need to be addressed.

- First, why should we advocate *poverty eradication* in Zambia today?
- Second, is there any *value-added* component in the churches’ participation in policy debate about poverty eradication?

POVERTY: A SIGN AND A CAUSE

Poverty is *multi-dimensional*, embracing deprivations of income, access to services, voice in decision-making, etc. From the outset, it is important to be analytically very clear that poverty is a *sign*, a symptom of something very wrong in human society. And it is also a *cause*, an influence that perpetuates an unacceptable situation in human society. What does that mean?

Pope Paul VI defines development in his 1967 statement, *Progress of Peoples*: “Development is the movement from less human conditions to more human conditions.” Therefore we can say:

- Poverty is a *sign* that development has not occurred, if people are not enjoying the basic human conditions owed to them by reason of their innate dignity as daughters and sons of God, made in God’s image.
- Poverty is a *cause* that blocks that development by preventing people from working toward these human conditions, marginalising them in the process of empowerment and achievement and thus bringing about more inhumane conditions.

Poverty is not a necessary, inevitable human state of being or an acceptable God-willed situation. It is a consequence of the way we humans have designed the economic, political, social, cultural, gender, ecological and religious structures of society. *It is the explicit outcome of conscious decisions made by some humans.*

This fact is obvious. Simply reflect that there is sufficient food produced in the world today to eliminate global hunger. But economic and political decisions have been made that prevent access to a daily sufficiency of food to more than two billions of our sisters and brothers, millions of them struggling to survive here in Zambia.

Moreover, here in Zambia, we do indeed have adequate *resources* to meet basic needs such as food, housing, clean water, education and health services. But we lack committed *priorities* to put those resources at the disposal of true national development. Bluntly put, Ministers drive expensive vehicles, children lack schoolbooks!

That is why we prefer, both on analytical grounds of clarity and political grounds of motivation, to speak not of the “poor” but of the “impoverished.” People are *impoverished*, in the sense that their condition is by and large an imposed condition, the result of policies and programmes, priorities and politics.

People are indeed *poverty-stricken*, to use another phrase. Oh, yes, of course, some people are poor because they are lazy, lack responsibility, and are culturally ready to accept their deprivation. Oh, yes, maybe 1% of the 80% in Zambia.... But let us be realistic and talk about the vast, overwhelming majority, not the handful of exceptional cases!

We emphasise this obvious point because one still can hear in many circles the assertion that poverty is really a natural situation, one that we realistically cannot speak of ever eradicating. And then the positive, supposedly irrefutable point is made from Scripture: after all, didn't Jesus say: “The poor you will always have with you?”

But, please recall two points. *First*, Jesus made this as an *empirical observation* not as a *policy mandate*! Yes, the poor are in our midst, and indeed in great numbers, but that does not mean we should be sure that our policies are such that we perpetuate their presence!

Second, and the strongest point, Jesus made that comment in the scriptural context of the Old Testament recognition that the presence of the poor in our midst is a sign that we are not living out the Covenant. Deuteronomy makes this very clear. And that is why Jesus could say so strongly, echoing Isaiah, that his mission was to “bring good news to the poor,” overturning their structural situation by means such as setting prisoners free, opening eyes of the blind (including the blind political and religious leaders!), lifting up the oppressed and proclaiming and establishing the Jubilee reign of freeing slaves, redistributing land and cancelling debts (see Luke 4: 14-21).

IS POVERTY ERADICATION UTOPIAN?

But what about this phrase, “poverty eradication” – is not that a bit idealistic, even quite unrealistic, especially in our context of Zambia, or of wider Africa? Let us make some appropriate distinctions and then conclude why we believe we must keep that phrase of poverty eradication as our solid guide.

- *Poverty alleviation* – this is the work of lessening the suffering of the poor, meeting their immediate pressing needs. Welfare, handouts, social security, safety nets, etc. Deal with the widows and the orphans, the elderly and the handicapped. This is, basically, the *assistance of charity*.

- *Poverty reduction* – this is the task of lowering the numbers of those living below the poverty line, eliminating them from the rolls of the deprived. Provide them with jobs, with health and education services, with opportunities to rise above the poverty line. This is, basically, the *commitment of development*.
- *Poverty eradication* – this is the challenge of restructuring society so that the impoverished disappear, the immense absolute numbers decrease to minimal exceptional cases. This calls for planning, for priorities, for shifts in power, for restructuring society, for “revolution.” This is, basically, the *transformation of justice*.

Now why would we insist that in our policy debates and decisions we focus on *poverty eradication*? Let us give a parallel case. Let us compare poverty to *sin*. For example, the sin of corruption, or adultery, or racism or sexism. All serious evils, all to be condemned, all to be overcome with God’s gracious help.

- *Sin alleviation* – corruption or adultery, racism or sexism, continues, but we lessen its impact on people who might suffer its consequences. We comfort the sinned against but do not confront the sinners.
- *Sin reduction* – we try our best to lessen the instances of corruption and adultery, racism and sexism. We pass restrictive laws, we educate and promote moral development to reduce the numbers of sin. Adultery only three times a month, not three times a week....
- *Sin eradication* – we work to change the attitudes of hearts and the structures of society that make sin present, that encourages and facilitates corruption, adultery, racism and sexism. While recognising the universal and lasting presence of “original sin,” we promote a *conversion* that would do away with its influence and its suffering.

Now we know that it is not possible to completely eradicate sin in this, our human vale of tears. We have no heaven on earth! Yet this is an *ideal* that we labour to achieve, that we struggle to establish. Because we have a vision of honesty, of fidelity, of respect for human dignity, we do not rest with only *alleviating* the suffering of sin or *reducing* its numerical instances. No, we commit ourselves to eradicating the sin, with a cooperative effort to realise the ideal that we pray for every day: “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!”

And so it is in the task of poverty eradication. This phrase or concept, with its attendant policies and priorities, gives us a *vision* that motivates our hearts and guides our heads – ultimately, that opens our hands in our active involvement to transform society.

Moreover, this emphasis on poverty eradication also gives us a particular positive direction in our work of dealing with poverty. Professor V. Seshamani, of the Department of Economics of the University of Zambia, has cautioned that a focus on reduction in *numbers* of those classified as poor – e.g., reducing the poverty statistic by 15% or 20% in the next ten years – can miss the most important dynamics of society.

For we can have policies that provide those close to the line of poverty with improved conditions (e.g., health, housing) and thus pull them above the line, thereby reducing the absolute number to some desired goal. But these very desirable policies might not in fact “trickle down” to those living far below the poverty line, the really destitute. Yes,

policies of poverty reduction may bring some national improvement, but in the *instances* of poverty and not in the *intensity* of poverty.

Professor Seshamani argues that poverty strategies should therefore focus primarily on those who are most extremely poor and enable them to move progressively to less extreme, less inhuman, levels -- even if this does not significantly reduce the absolute levels of poverty. While such a policy might not appeal to our international partners or national political leaders who emphasise poverty *reduction*, it promises to lay a more solid foundation for the poverty *eradication* that must be our clear goal here in Zambia.

VALUE-ADDED DIMENSION OF CST

This *Policy Brief* on poverty eradication is a publication of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR). The JCTR considers the church's social teaching (CST) to be realistically very important, contextually very worthwhile, and potentially very influential. Thus, before answering the second question about the value-added dimension of the CST in addressing poverty eradication, let us make a few brief explanatory remarks about CST.

By CST, we mean the body of social wisdom about human individuals in society, and about the structures of that society that enable humanity to come to its fullness. That social wisdom (touching both head and heart) can be found in: Scripture, the writings of theologians, documents of churches and the witness of just persons and communities.

Sometimes we tend to focus primarily on the documents, but we know that the authority and the authenticity, the relevance and the credibility of the documents come from their foundation in scripture, their clarification in theological reflection, and their evidence in lived experience.

The purpose of the social teaching can be said to be three-fold:

- Personal: *to guide individual consciences in making just decisions* – e.g., about wages to pay, the treatment of woman, the respect for the environment.
- Ecclesial: *to shape the response of the church to social issues* – e.g., about racial attitudes, political involvement, care for the poor.
- Societal: *to influence the activities and structures of the public sector* – e.g., about economic policies, international relations, peace and war decisions.

A very important point to note about the church's social teaching is that it does *not* provide a set of answers or a course of prescriptions. Rather it offers guidelines to follow, questions to ponder, directions to pursue. *It is a light for our paths, not a roadmap for our journeys.*

To be specific to this topic, can the church's social teaching provide an approach to poverty eradication that offers a *viable alternative* to the rigid prescriptions of orthodox economics (or what is often referred to as the "Washington Consensus" developed by the World Bank, IMF and USA Treasury)? This orthodox economics of *neo-liberalism* controlled the recent Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) we endured – and still continue to endure -- in Zambia (the most rigid, most rapid and most radical adjustment

programme on the continent of Africa). It also determines much of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) activities today.

But to offer an *alternative* approach requires more than a mere outline of different policies and strategies. Fundamentally, it requires *another vision of what is valuable, another perception of what is possible, another recognition of what is required*.

JCTR believes that we can be helped to offer that vision, perception and recognition through reflection upon the heritage of our church's social teaching. While the church's social teaching does not offer specific answers and concrete programmes, it does provide a framework of principles and values that enable us to address specifics in a holistic fashion. And in this direction lies its *value-added dimension to public policy debates*.

To speak directly to the issue of poverty eradication as the desired goal of policies to be pursued in Zambia by the people and their government, there are four stages where the church's social teaching offers a value-added dimension:

- *Entry point*: what is the foundation for our approach to poverty eradication programmes?
- *Process*: how is the poverty eradication strategy designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated?
- *Content*: what are the major priorities that are manifested in the programmes? Who is benefiting from the changes and who is bearing the burden of the changes?
- *Outcome*: what are the consequences in society at large of the poverty eradication programmes?

ENTRY POINT

The church's social teaching takes as its entry point into policy formulation a belief in the *fundamental dignity of every human person*. This is a scriptural teaching – Genesis 1:27. Made in the image and likeness of God, 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.

That is to say, the state does not grant rights, only God grants rights. The state has the obligation to protect, foster and promote rights. (This point should be especially remembered as here in Zambia -- and elsewhere in Africa -- we debate *constitutional review*.)

The dignity of every person arises not from any human quality or accomplishment nor is it the consequence of any human achievement or attainment. It knows no specification because of gender or race, age or economic status. In economic parlance, human beings are not units of production or outputs of transformations. Human beings are not the *objects* but the *subjects* of economic activity. Put simply in the CST, *the economy exists for the person, the person does not exist for the economy*.

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.

To speak directly to the issue of poverty eradication, this principle of CST serves as an *entry point* that orients all else that follows. We are not dealing with technical or mechanical or automatic or purely natural arrangements in society. We are dealing with arrangements affecting persons whose worth and dignity is a consequence of their imaging the infinite worth and dignity of their Creator.

It is because of this entry point that we must continually emphasise that poverty and poverty eradication are not primarily *economic* issues. They are *moral* issues. We believe that in Zambia this conception has the value-added force of clarifying issues and motivating responses.

PROCESS

The equal dignity of each human person demands that decisions that affect persons must involve those persons in the process of decision-making. What does this mean in relationship to the *preparation* of the PRSP?

According to the conditions required by the World Bank and the IMF, the preparation of the PRSP must involve “meaningful participation of civil society”. In Zambia this has involved the truly creative and meaningful input of Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR). But it is important to emphasise here that participation in the PRSP process is not simply a *political* device to gain support of the programme but rather it is an *ethical* demand to guarantee legitimacy to the fundamental orientation of the programme.

I want to argue that respect for involvement of “civil society” can be seen to be a contemporary expression of the traditional church’s social teaching principle of “subsidiarity,” i.e., the requirement that decisions should be made at the closest possible level to the people affected.

Subsidiarity disperses authority to the maximum feasible local focus by involving people not in perfunctory *consultation* – “What do you think of this document we expert outsiders have prepared?” – but in genuine *participation* – “What shall we do together to come up with a consensual document?” As we all know, in policy preparation there is a world of difference between *consultation* and *participation*!

Involvement of civil society thus requires both (1) a *democratic mechanism* that assures adequate representation of all interests and (2) a *technical capacity* that assures competent input into the process.

CSPR has struggled in Zambia in the past three years -- sometimes with encouraging successes and other times with discouraging setbacks -- to establish a *democratic mechanism* in the process that respects the rights of individuals to participate in choices that affect their lives. When the World Bank and IMF emphasise that the PRSP must be “home grown” (i.e., designed through processes driven by countries themselves), this must be accompanied by concrete steps that ensure that all parties operate in a public, transparent and accountable fashion. For example, public review of agreements between lending institutions and governments must be mandated at each stage. Monitoring of implementation must be integral to the programmes.

Moreover, putting the principle of subsidiarity into practice in the PRSP process requires that national governments and their citizens should ultimately hold authority to decide their own economies and national development plans, according to their knowledge, experience and values. It is obvious, therefore, that it is neither ethical nor efficient for the World Bank or the IMF to hold a “veto” power over PRSP documents that arise from a well-deliberated and widely consultative process.

Furthermore, commitment to strengthening the *technical capacity* of civil society to comprehend and analyze the information on poverty and economics is also essential if subsidiarity is to be truly effective.

Therefore, emphasis on the rights to participation requires that the new opportunities for input into PRSP must be strengthened through capacity-building efforts (information gathering, analytical skills, advocacy planning, monitoring capacities, etc.). It is encouraging, then, to note that civil society in Zambia has indeed a high level of competence in dealing with the technical side of the PRSP as well as in communicating the issues to the wider society. Several key cooperating partners (donors) have assisted in these efforts.

CONTENT

The *substance* of economic reform programmes that are influenced by the church’s social teaching should be marked by two fundamental principles. *First*, there should be mutually shared rights and responsibilities, or the promotion of the *common good*. Second, there should be a special concern for the least advantaged in society, or the preferential *option for the poor*.

Common good considerations raise basic questions about consequences in the ordinary lives of citizens.

- Who receives the *benefits* from economic reform programmes?
- Who bears the *burden* that such programmes create?

The principle of the common good requires that the elements of the reform programmes should benefit everyone in society, not simply the rich and the powerful. The benefits must be clearly directed towards all. So-called “trickle down” benefits coming to the less advantaged from the investments and achievements of the rich -- something always more *promised* than *realised* -- are simply not acceptable.

Moreover, the burdens of economic transition toward a more open market -- such as down-sized budgets, retrenched work forces and market-driven increases in the cost of living -- should not fall only on those who already are suffering from economic hardships, leaving fairly untouched the already advantaged sectors of society. The common good requires a *sharing of burdens* as well as a *sharing of blessings*.

One clear consequence of an emphasis upon promotion of the common good is a norm for evaluating the operations of the so-called *free market*. Yes, the church’s social teaching has been wary of *command economies* (socialist models). But it has also been wary of *liberalised economies* (capitalist models). This is a point with special relevance to Zambia, in the context of economic reform policies that have largely been imposed from outside.

The challenge to both socialist and capitalist systems comes from the same principle: the promotion of the common good. So in the construction of poverty eradication programmes, we have to weigh both the advantages and the disadvantages of the operation of the market. To put this point into economic jargon, we must appraise macro-economic structural adjustments in light of their impact on the value outcome of their operations. One analyst has well expressed the point by stating, "The market may be a good *servant* but it is indeed a bad *master*."

Second, the principle of the *option for the poor* means that the content of economic reform programmes must be evaluated in terms of its impact on the most vulnerable part of society, the poor, especially women and children. The content of poverty eradication programmes obviously are oriented toward the poor, but whether or not the poor actually benefit is something to be rigorously analysed, constantly monitored and diligently evaluated.

Pro-poor programmes should provide not only *social sector* development (e.g., health and education) but also *productive sector* opportunities (e.g., agriculture services for small farmers, youth employment generation schemes, micro-credit facilities for women, etc.). Economic growth objectives must be pro-poor from the start.

Poverty concerns should not be tacked on to traditional macro-economic policies as after-thoughts. And when tensions or trade-offs emerge between growth-oriented and poverty-oriented policies, they should be resolved in favour of poverty-oriented policies.

To repeat points made earlier, these content concerns from CST for both the common good and the option for the poor can be summed up in the oft-cited principle that *the economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy*. This states clearly the primacy of human dignity and rights as the foundation for all economic activity. This is the point behind the advocacy by Zambia's Catholic Commission for Justice Peace (CCJP) for a truly pro-poor budget, advocacy based upon CST and shown, for example, in its regular analysis of the Zambian annual budgets.

OUTCOME

Finally, we can rightly ask, where is this poverty eradication emphasis headed? In the long run, what do we hope to achieve?

The overall vision of the church's social teaching for society is expressed in the principle of *solidarity*, the recognition of the interconnectedness -- *ethical* as well as *empirical* -- of personal and institutional activities that make up the social fabric of human existence.

In the church's social teaching, solidarity is promoted in conscious acts that build community. When economic activity undercuts community -- e.g., creating the great gaps between rich and poor that exist in Zambia today -- then solidarity is destroyed. Effective poverty eradication programmes and promotion of pro-poor economic growth policies must build up real solidarity.

If ever we wanted to sense the *idealistic* character of CST, it is here when we speak about the principle of solidarity. Pope John Paul II has spoken most eloquently about solidarity -- moving it beyond mere interdependence or a system of interrelationships

based on economic factors alone. He calls it a *moral category*, rooted ultimately in the religious fact of the community of solidarity manifested in the life of the Trinity.

Solidarity among humans is not vague compassion for the less privileged but active structuring of a society of mutual and socially just sharing. The outcome for a poverty eradication programme would be a society where great gaps between rich and poor do not exist, at national as well as global levels.

Let us be clear: solidarity does not demand an *egalitarian* society where everyone has exactly the same. But it does demand a more *equitable* society where the gross inequalities of participation and distribution are eliminated. And that certainly is an immense task!

The JCTR monthly *Basic Needs Basket* attempts to address the challenge of that task by demonstrating in clear and simple fashion the disparity between necessary expenditures and available incomes. Basing advocacy interventions on the principle of solidarity, calls are then made for policies such as minimal wages, gender sensitivity, review of prices on basic necessities, and elimination of discriminatory fees for health and education services.

Another component of solidarity that must be emphasised is *ecological*, since we humans are always members of the *earth community* and must be respectful of the rights and demands of that community -- e.g., environmental justice. This means that the outcome of poverty eradication programmes must also be evaluated in terms of the impact on the community of creation. To be honest, this is something that we are still learning in the unfolding of the church's social teaching.

Finally, the emphasis on the outcome of solidarity demonstrates the powerful reason behind the Jubilee-Zambia campaign for "cancellation of debt for poverty eradication." Support of the *Jubilee principle* of cancelling debts, redistributing land and freeing slaves is support for concrete actions aimed at restoring the bonds of broken community and thus assuring the reality of solidarity.

In recent years, there may have been some people who were surprised at the very strong support in Zambia and around Africa, indeed, around the world, of the Jubilee movement. But for those aware of the clear lessons of the church's social teaching, especially the teaching on solidarity, there is no surprise!

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This *Policy Brief* has aimed to make the case for the relevance – analytical and political – of a focus on poverty eradication rather than simply on poverty alleviation or poverty reduction. Moreover, the purpose has been to show that there is a value-added dimension in the church's social teaching in understanding the entry point, process, content and outcome of poverty eradication policies such as the current PRSP here in Zambia.

Several obvious policy recommendations can be drawn from this:

1. The struggle for poverty eradication in Zambia must be seen primarily as a moral and ethical concern, not simply as an economic matter.

2. The socio-economic right to a decent life-style free from poverty for every Zambian must be enshrined in the new Republican Constitution currently being designed.
3. Zambia's focus on attaining the United Nation's *Millennium Development Goals* (MDG) must be prioritised to put primary energies on poverty eradication.
4. All budget expenditures – whether on salaries, social services, infrastructure, presidential trips, bye-elections, etc. – must be evaluated and approved in terms of their impact on the promotion of poverty eradication.
5. All candidates for political offices, at both national and local levels, must be questioned and evaluated on the basis of their clear stands on poverty eradication as a priority for Zambia.
6. Programmes of the international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank and international cooperating partners must only be accepted as Zambian programmes if they clearly are creating poverty eradication and not reinforcing structural patterns of greater poverty.

These policy recommendations are not meant only as an academic exercise or as an interesting exhibition of yet another heroic but futile attempt to change the course of history. No, the purpose of this *Policy Brief* is to provide a substantial stimulant for discussion and a sharpened focus for questions. Ultimately, it is intended to move toward the action necessary to secure the policies that we must have for attaining an integral and sustainable development beneficial for all Zambians.

The quarterly JCTR *Policy Brief* is designed to inform decision-makers and the general Zambian public about key issues that require urgent and effective response to meet the needs of integral, sustainable and socially just development. Previous issues of the *Policy Brief* have examined topics such as economic diversification, social indicators, and the introduction of GMO agriculture. These are available from the JCTR office. We welcome comments on our positions.