

# IS THERE A ZAMBIA FOOD CRISIS?

Peter Henriot

There is a lot of talk these days about the “World Food Crisis.” Prices of basic foods like rice and wheat doubling, riots in many countries, collapse of governments in some places, and projections of even more difficult times to come.

Is it correct to also talk about a “Zambia Food Crisis”? Well let’s just take a quick look at some facts and analysis that I believe we all should be paying closer attention to these days

## RISING PRICES

First, a story that one of my colleagues told me last week that gives some real life to the topic. It seems that he had torn a bad rip in one of his trousers and his wife took the trousers to a near-by tuntamba to have them repaired by an entrepeneuring seamstress. “Zingati?” she asked. “15 pin!” came the reply. And when the wife expressed surprise and asked why such a high price for only a very small job, the answer came back quickly: “Mapackets a sugar – 15 pin!”

Well, it does seem true that prices really have gone up all around, whether to repair rips or to sweeten tea! And everyone is experiencing that, with a ripple effect touching everything. The JCTR’s Basic Needs Basket (BNB) for April showed the cost of basic food items for a family of six in Lusaka to be K742,700 – up from K654,750 in February, and K514,600 a year ago, in April 2007. The soon to be released May BNB will surely show another significant increase.

The sources of the increase in food prices include the basics for Zambian families: mealie meal, beans, kapenta, dry fish, meat, tomatoes and onions.

These JCTR figures that show dramatic rises are backed up by the official Central Statistics Office (CSO) acknowledgement that the much touted “single digit inflation” figure for Zambia may at least temporarily be a passing phenomenon.

Why the increases in food prices in Zambia? Surely the heavy rains and consequent floods have affected crop production. Steep rises in fuel prices affect transport costs that affect local market prices. And global costs of wheat – largely impacted by the switch from growing grains to feed people to growing bio-fuels to run automobiles – push bread prices here to higher and higher figures.

## FUTURE OUTLOOK

What does the future look like for Zambia? Not so very favourable, according to a major report being released today in Rome during a summit of a number of world leaders (I’m not sure whether Zambia will be represented). The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report lists Zambia among twenty-two nations that are particularly threatened by the global food crisis that has seen soaring prices

According to a news release about the FAO report, “High oil prices, growing demand, flawed trade policies, panic buying and speculation have sent food prices soaring worldwide.” And the FAO director-general, Jacques Diouf, has said that the crisis underlines “the fragility of the balance between global food prices and the needs of the world’s inhabitants.”

When I read about this report, I thought of a comment made a few weeks ago during an evening conference sponsored by the Economics Association of Zambia (EAZ). One rather radical member of

the audience had argued that Zambia suffers from a socio-economic situation of “the *obesity* of the minority and the *malnourishment* of the majority.” Not very polite language, but is it a true description?

A not-so-radical economist, Amartya Sen (winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics a few years ago) wrote an article in The New York Times last week that seems to me to give a similar description that when applied to Zambia might be more polite but still all-too-true! According to Sen:

“It is a tale of two peoples. In one version of the story, a country with a lot of poor people suddenly experiences fast economic expansion, but only half of the people share in the new prosperity. The favored ones spend a lot of their new income on food, and unless supply expands very quickly, prices shoot up. The rest of the poor now face higher food prices but no greater income, and begin to starve. Tragedies like this happen repeatedly in the world.”

## **URBAN-RURAL SITUATION**

In releasing the April BNB figures, the JCTR commented that the much acclaimed improved national economy, while paying attention to keeping economic fundamentals right, should ultimately be seen in terms of people’s ability to afford food and other basic essentials. After all, “the economy is the people”!

In Zambia the argument is frequently made that increasing prices for food will be for the benefit of the rural population, that is, for those involved in agricultural production. But surely that argument needs closer analytical examination. Miniva Chibuye of the Social Conditions Programme of the JCTR observes that high urban food prices could indeed be seen as a way for changing the long-time development lopsidedness that has favoured urban populations and therefore driven rural-urban migration.

But Chibuye notes that “one needs to recognise that there are preconditions to be met before rural populations benefit from increased urban food prices. Such preconditions would include improved productive capacities for rural populations, through among others, irrigation schemes that would facilitate off-season crop production of these populations.”

## **POSSIBLE POLICIES**

So whether or not Zambia has a serious and extended food crisis will ultimately depend on some wise national policies. Discussion of these policies might not make such dramatic or entertaining headlines as the shouting matches between politicians but would definitely contribute more to the well-being of the citizens of this very rich country that has very impoverished people.

What might some of those policies be? More space than this short column is required for a full answer, but some obvious suggestions include greater emphasis in the national budget on agriculture (not, as in the 2008 budget, a significant cut in expenditure), removal of food from strictly market considerations (a central human right should not be subject to market manipulations), perhaps some careful luring of foreign investors into the agricultural sector (and not simply into the mining sector), rural development that includes better infrastructure (e.g., roads, markets, health and education facilities), and some caution on the rush to bio-fuels at the possible expense of food production (prudent use of land).

On the last point about bio-fuels, Amartya Sen makes a trenchant observation about the danger that “the stomachs of the hungry must also compete with fuel tanks”!

What I am suggesting here is that we need to take seriously the mounting food crisis in Zambia and move it into moral considerations, intelligent debates and effective policies.

What political party is willing to take this up seriously?

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[1100 words]

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