A CALL TO ACTION AS BNNB RISES AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Zambia has in the past month recorded an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases standing at over 100 confirmed cases and 3 deaths at the close of April 2020. The effect of the pandemic on the health sector and the economy at large, cannot be over looked. For one, in the wake of the virus, the International Monetary Fund has projected that the Zambian economy will grow by a negative 2.6 percent in 2020. The Ministry of Finance has further projected that the country will record a budget deficit with revenues expected to be almost 20% below initial estimates. Government allocations towards various key functions will thus be severely affected.

The JCTR Basis Needs and Nutrition Basket (BNNB) which is a measure of the monthly cost of living for a family of 5 and conducted in 16 towns for the month of April 2020 stood at K7,158.67 for Lusaka. The April 2020 basket increased by approximately 2 percent or by K144.54 moving from K7,014.90 in March 2020. The noted increase in the basket can be attributed to increases in food items such as, other fruits which increased by K66.33 from K364.83 to K426.16, kapenta which increased by K57.07 from K163.93 to K221.00 and onion which increased by K21.16 from K58.98 to K80.14. Other items such as chicken, vegetables, soya pieces and beans price increseases were between K10 and K16. Some items from the non-food essential items also recorded price increases. Charcoal price increased by K14.10 from K344.00 to K358.40, washing paste increased by 6.29 from K49.13 to K55.42 and toilet paper moved by K5.73 from K22.98 to K28.71. The basket also recorded decreases in the prices of items such as tomatoes which reduced by K25.25 moving from K91.01 to K65.76, potatoes which reduced by K19.05 moving from K49.36 to K30.39 and mealie meal which reduced by K28.64 from K279.14 to 250.50 for 2 25kg bags.

From the April 2020 basket, a considerable number of both food and non food essential items recorded price increases. This comes at the backdrop of current income challenges due to job losses and reduced incomes in the wake of COVID-19. Price increases maybe attributed to the reduction in the supply of certain foods owing to country specific lockdowns introduced to halt the spread of COVID-19. Another factor could be the increase in demand for certain local items due to panic buying which led to shortages and consequently price increases. This comes as no surprise. In unveiling the March 2020 BNNB, JCTR projected that price increases were to be expected in the April BNNB for items like fruits owing to the impact of COVID-19 on supply chains. However, JCTR is pleased to note that mealie meal recorded a significant reduction in price in the month of April 2020 after price increases spanning months. This followed Government’s commendable effort in ensuring adequate supply of the commodity on the market.
Nonetheless, the increase in the prices of most items will result in families facing a greater challenge in meeting their basic needs, especially for households whose incomes are way below the estimated cost of living. Additional costs for COVID-19 prevention essentials such as masks, soaps and hand sanitisers have increased financial distress on poor and vulnerable households which now than ever before are in acute need of intervention for mere survival.

The JCTR calls on Government to take urgent measures to cushion households that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. With the projected close to 20% loss in revenue, Government faces significant challenges ahead. Nevertheless, the need to put in place measures to especially protect the poor and vulnerable still remains. Keen interest should be taken to address the looming hunger/malnutrition situation in some households.

We recommend that Government through its relevant agencies develops a clear roadmap and budget for “victims” of COVID-19 similar to the one being used for households hit by the 2020 floods. For example, vulnerable homes whose livelihoods depend on hand to mouth small scale businesses, may have been badly hit by the pandemic as their business activities have now reached their lowest ebb due to, among others, the stay at home preventive measure. Some marketeers the JCTR has spoken to have shared that COVID-19 has impacted on their livelihoods as they have experienced significant income losses due to the reduced influx of customers. While Government has announced a number of measures to ensure the economy stays afloat amidst COVID-19, measures are also needed to ensure that human lives are protected and well taken care of in this time of crisis.

**Note:** Kindly attribute the statement to Mrs. Chama Bowa Mundia, JCTR Programme Manager for Social and Economic Development

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