

Indifference in midst of biting Cost of Living

Beneath the surface of many of the disturbing moral, political, economic problems now looming is the growing incidence of non-altruistic economic decisions characterised by egocentrism and moral bankruptcy; first, was the RBM's decision to construct a K43m worth swimming pool, and now it's the people's representatives in parliament who on Tuesday 15th unleashed themselves of their political party differences to unanimously endorse a Public Appointments and Declaration of Assets Committee report. If adopted it would warrant a 72% increase on their basic pay, translating into 61% increase on their remuneration package in the midst of the country's economic turmoil and wide spread poverty that are making it very difficult for most Malawians to meet their basic needs. The foregoing decisions, made by both the RBM and the legislators, are unprecedented to and out of touch with the reality of most Malawians; it is reckless timing and leadership. In the intervening months, the costs of most BNB items have risen markedly, and to the distress of most Malawians, salaries are increasingly failing to keep pace as revealed in the salary survey carried out in July.

In the month of October, the price of maize hit an average of 11.7% increase in the four cities (Mzuzu, Lilongwe, Blantyre and Zomba). Equally the rural areas have been badly hit by the rising prices of maize. The average cost of maize in Chikwawa stood at MK2, 040.00 in October, compared with MK1, 600.00 during the comparable period last year, representing a 22% increase; Kasiya registered an average cost of K1, 625.00 in October compared with K1, 250.00 in the same period last year, representing a 23% increase. The fact that the staple food is recording alarming price increase is indicative of hard times ahead. It also presupposes that low and medium income households can expect the largest fall in their disposable incomes in the months to come and would better prepare for a squeeze in attempts to meet basic needs, the like of which many people might have never witnessed before. It is a wake-up call to government and other stakeholders in people's livelihoods to monitor the situation closely for timely interventions as the upcoming lean season might be more than what the country might have known in the previous years.

In these trying times the Catholic Social Teaching reminds the nation that "citizens and governments have duties to each other which must be carried out for the common good." People have the right and the duty to use their public offices to further the common good. The financial institutions, private businesses, and Political Leaders can never give their interests priority over the common good. Subsidiarity as the rule of social organization is, in this case, a nudging reminder that larger government structures have a role when greater social coordination and regulation are necessary for the common good. For instance, considering that salary increases might be a fairy tale for most working Malawians at the moment, the government can contemplate other possible ways of distributive justice such as raising the non-taxable bracket from the current

K12, 000 to K25, 000 and add further brackets to ensure that the income taxes are structured in such a way that the tax burden rises as income rises.

In these turbulent times, it is important to remember that people are the source, center, and purpose of all economic and social life and that the purpose of economic production is to serve people in their basic needs, mostly but not all. Accordingly, the CFSC is critical of the excessive economic and social differences among people or groups of people which violate social justice, equity, human dignity, and national peace (such as the looming civil servants strike warned by CSTU- Daily Times 17/11/12). It is also critical of the dangerous lack of balance between the few most affluent Malawians and the desperate masses.

Social Conditions Research Programme, Center for Social Concern, P.O. Box40049, Lilongwe,

E-mail: jkuppens@cfscmalawi.org or fmkomba@cfscmalawi.org Website: www.cfscmalawi.org

Mobile cell: The Executive Director (Fr Jos Kuppens) on 0888824552

or Interim (chizaburton@yahoo.co.uk) on 0995494183

Physical Office Location: Next to St. Francis Catholic Parish. Area 25 C. Kanengo