



Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference

STATEMENT ON THE ECONOMY, HIGH LEVELS OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND COST OF LIVING

We, the bishops of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, are concerned about the current high levels of unemployment and the rising cost of living and how they disproportionately impact the lives of those at the margins of the economy. Both the high levels of unemployment and the cost of living are pushing more people into higher levels of household debt and deep poverty. We call on the government, business and those with influence and power to take note and action about the issues we raise below.

We denounce the continued preoccupation of our leaders with self-enrichment, party politics and factional battles

Amid this national crisis, it is sad that the focus of our political leaders remains fixed on narrow vested interests and not on issues important to ordinary citizens, particularly the homeless, the unemployed, and the hungry. In the strongest terms possible, we denounce the continued preoccupation of our leaders with self-enrichment, party politics and factional battles at a time when the majority in this country are struggling to make ends meet. We urgently appeal to the government to initiate more, robust measures to address the fuel and food price hike.

The need to regularly review the adverse impact of structural reforms on the poor

Another concern for us is how the most vulnerable in our country are disproportionately bearing the social impacts of structural reforms and fiscal consolidation. While acknowledging the country's need to urgently tackle the structural barriers to growth, we appeal to the government to introduce stronger social review mechanism so as to ensure that the austerity measures and other structural reforms are regularly reviewed not solely in terms of economic efficiency, but also in terms of their adverse impact on the poor.

We ask that the social review of austerity measures be undertaken particularly with respect to the basic education sector and health sector, having due regard to how budget cuts in such sectors re-enforce the two-tiered system of education and health services, with the poor condemned to sub-standard services while the rich continue to access a high standard of education and health services.

We are scandalised by the government's decision to increase the salaries of ministers, premiers, MECs and Members of Parliament by 3 per cent. This decision on salary increases for politicians shows that the Independent Commission for the Remuneration of Public Office-Bearers and the government are insensitive to the plight of the poor and the financial hardships that many ordinary citizens are going through during this time.

The persistent gap between the rich and the poor

We are concerned about the persistent gap between the rich and the poor in our country and how it continues to impose great risk to the country's economic growth and national security, creating conditions that could fuel violent unrest and social instability. Structural reforms to address the barriers to growth will not result in integral human development if there is an increased indifference to the country's economic inequalities and the need for economic transformation, particularly concerning land inequalities, mining, and agriculture.

The vast disparities between the rural and urban economies

Of particular concern to us is the vast disparities between the rural and urban economies, which have resulted in the exclusion of the rural poor from equal and significant participation in the country's economy. Our rural economies continue to suffer from severe neglect regarding educational opportunities, viable municipalities, and public and private investments. Our rural youth find it hard to find jobs when the building of rural economies is grounded solely on mining, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors, which are characterised by increased automation and an exploitative labour system.

We, therefore, call on the government to invest more in building thriving and self-sustaining rural economies, including self-sustaining village economies, that generate massive job creation for the rural youth, including those classified as skilled labour.

The Eskom Crisis, as well as Transnet's failing rail infrastructure

We remind the government of the urgent need to address the load shedding and the Eskom Crisis, as well as Transnet's failing rail infrastructure, which negatively impacts the lives of the poor and the prospects of economic recovery. In the interest of inclusion, the much talked about decentralisation of energy production into private business must include viable models of community-private partnerships that ensure significant economic benefits to the people in the rural areas, particularly with respect to large-scale solar and wind projects.

Parties need to work together in fixing failed municipalities

Considering that municipalities provide most of the services important for lifting people out of poverty, we make a strong call on all political parties in our country, particularly those deeply involved in unhealthy coalition politics, to set aside their political differences and work together to fix failed municipalities. The fixing of financial and capacity issues in municipalities should include finding ways of building self-sustaining township economies and village-based economies grounded on small-scale producers and small business development.

All implicated in state capture and other forms of corruption must be held to account

It is clear to us that the benefits of growth are not adequately reaching the poor mainly because of corruption, wasteful expenditure, incompetence, and mismanagement of government funds. We find this to be morally unacceptable. At a time when many people are struggling to make ends meet, we firmly denounce the failure of the government to address accountability issues and consequence management in such matters.

The fight against corruption should be guided by the good of the nation and not by blind loyalty to political parties and factional interests. We ask the government to ensure that those implicated in state capture and other forms of corruption are held to account irrespective of their affiliation to a particular political party and faction.

Stop the culture of cable theft, non-payment of municipal rates, vandalism, and damage to infrastructure

We remind all South Africans that each of us is responsible for rebuilding our country's economy, including the municipalities and state-owned enterprises. This includes working together as communities to stop the culture of cable theft, non-payment of municipal rates, vandalism, and damage to infrastructure. We also call on the citizens to use whatever

opportunity and means available to grow their own food and earn some income instead of expecting everything from the government.

We ask God to continue healing our economy

We promise our prayers for families struggling with current economic hardships and call on those who can, to be moved to do something about the plight of their brothers and sisters "so that by the power of the Holy Spirit they may abound in hope" (Romans 15:23). Sustained by the Risen Christ, our hope (1 Corinthians 15:12), we ask God to continue healing our economy so that it becomes a just and inclusive economy that works for the benefit of all.



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