



Keynote Address

Director, Centre for Social Concern (CfSC)

Fr. Dr. James Ngahy, M. Afr.

2nd July, 2020

Dissemination of Living Wage in Farms

With humble acknowledgement of the presence of: The representative(s) from: Ministry of Labour at State level, Ministry of Labour at District level, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Gender, Ministry of Finance, The Representative(s) from: Agriculture Plantations Workers Union (APWU), Malawi Congress of Trade Union (MCTU), Employers Consultative Association of Malawi (ECAM), Sugar Plantation Union, Rain Forest Alliance, Every Girl in School Alliance (EGISA), Farm Radio Trust, Our Collaborators and partners on the issues of Social Concerns, Friends of the Centre for Social Concern here present, And the Representative of our very benefactor (funder/donor) Hivos, in the presence of Mrs. Veronica Kaitano, The Staff of the Centre for Social Concern here present, Very distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of the Provincial, the Legal Stakeholder and the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees (BoT) of the Centre for Social Concern (CfSC), my own behalf and Our Staff members, I would like to warmly and whole-heartedly welcome you to this very important conference, taking place at this very venue, namely ‘Crossroads Hotel.’

From experience, we know that scarification is the process of reducing or breaking the seed coat so that moisture can penetrate and the embryo can begin the germination process. And the germination process leads to a seedling, and the seedling as a growing plant leads to a tree; even a huge tree providing shade to all sorts and kinds of birds. That’s exactly what we are here for this morning, and indeed, that’s what we expect Malawi to be in the near future – hopefully!!!

This reality is not far fetched. It’s in our midst witnessed today, in our very contemporary context, namely the prospective ‘eschatological Malawi.’ Simple example, out of our realistic research and data collection and analysis by the Centre for Social Concern both in the villages and the urban areas, the MK35,000 and the Mk45,000 tax free band was simply unrealistic. By ‘breaking the seed coat so that the moisture can penetrate and the embryo can begin the germination process’, we pushed for the minimum wage to be increased. In humbleness and simplicity, I would like to extend my humble appreciation to both MCTU and ECAM for our positive collaboration and cooperation for engaging the government this very aspect of minimum wage to becoming a reality.

I am glad to read that, “Government will engage Malawi Congress of Trade Union (MCTU) and Employers Consultative Association of Malawi (ECAM) to review the minimum wage from the current rate of K35,000 per month to a proposed K50,000 per month.” Indeed, as the Secretary General MCTU, Mr. Dennis Kalekeni, welcomed the proposed increment that this consultation symbolises “the new government’s adherence to the rule of law.”¹

Our topic and discussion of today, namely “Dissemination of Living Wage in Farms,” is not in vacuum

¹ Dumbani Mzale, “Budget of Promises” in The Nation (Wednesday, 1 July 2020), p. 1

or out of blue; it is a reality that the Centre for Social Concern is concerned. We simply want to uplift and empower our mothers, our sisters, our fathers and brothers who are sweating and sacrificing in those farms for a peanut! We know how our mothers work hard, how our sisters labour in the farms in order to make ends meet for themselves and for their families. And yet the reward of their labour, very often, is very minimal, almost nothing.

We, the ones, participating here today can lead to that realisation of empowering them; hence, have a fair wage that will give them a dignified life. Yes, it is possible! Yes, we can!

Today, the Centre for Social Concern (CfSC) brings to you another reflection on the living wage of workers in farms. Our mothers and sisters who labour and sweat in the farms: Who gives them a thought? Who thinks about them? How does the minimum wage affect them? Does it affect them at all? Most of them the story goes, ‘Yesterday is gone, today we sweat for the day, tomorrow who knows, who cares for and about us?’

We are all brothers and sisters! If one part of my body is affected, surely, the rest is also affected!

Centre for Social Concern (CfSC) founded in 2002 as a faith-based organization promotes research and action on social issues, linking the Christian faith and social justice. The CfSC aims at transforming the unjust structures in Malawian society through research and advocacy so as to ensure sustained change in policies for the betterment of all in line with their human dignity. We aim at humanising the dehumanised.

In the spirit of exposing the plight of the poor and with the realization that the average person is struggling to afford even the most basic of monthly commodities, CfSC, through its Social Conditions research Programme conducts the “Basic Needs Basket” (BnB) survey for rural and urban dwellers/settlements since 2002. The Program aims at gathering facts through research; hence, use those facts to lobby and advocate for change in policies and/or practices that inhibit attainment of sustainable livelihoods. The hallmark of the program is to contribute towards a humane and socially just Malawi.

The Centre’s activity dwells on four pillars. Economic Governance, Active Citizenship, Social Conditions Research and Interreligious Dialogue. The living wage assessment falls under two pillars, namely Economic Governance and Active Citizenship, and is informed with data from the Social Conditions Research which documents through Urban and Rural Basic Needs Basket (BnB) on the cost of living.

Studies carried by the Centre for Social Concern realizes that the citizenry are still being oppressed by policies and laws that are exclusive in nature. The overall persistent high level poverty in Malawi suggests that poverty is more of the consequence on how resources are organized and distributed other than the availability of those resources.

Inequality and lack of active citizenship in Malawi remains pronounced.

In other words, the overall persistent high level poverty in Malawi suggests that poverty is primarily the consequence of how the society distributes wealth than how much is available in totality. This means that poverty, which the United Nations defines as “Fundamentally, a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and cloth[e] a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one’s food or a job to earn one’s living, not having access to credit.”²

² <https://www.poverty.ac.uk/definitions-poverty/absolute-and-overall-poverty> UN 1998

Malawi has been discovered to have some of the most distorted systems of wealth redistribution in southern Africa. Very high income inequality. How do you explain the highly income earning personnel import some of the commodities freely in the country while the rest pay heavy taxes? Who cares about those women who work very hard in the farms?

This unfair economy exploits and marginalizes many female workers while increasing the wealth and power of the rich, the elite. It is not fair and this needs to be corrected. Although this inequality level is inevitable, the gap should not be too wide. Economic reforms should be embarked upon to ensure that people benefit and not just the government making profit. People, especially our mothers and sisters, should have the right to a decent and dignified life. These are the ones who sweat most in their daily endeavours and very often without complaining, and poorly rewarded.

It is on this background that Centre for Social Concern (CfSC) with funding from Hivos is implementing a project on promotion of decent work in horticultural farms. The project seeks to contribute towards achieving right to decent work for female workers under poor conditions in the global horticultural value chain by making global horticultural value chain gender inclusive. One of the objectives of the project is to lobby and advocate for a decent wage for farm workers especially women in the horticultural industry. Since 2019, with funding from Hivos, Centre for Social Concern has been carrying out living wage studies on horticulture farms. The first study was done in three countries, namely Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi. The current living wage study was done in Malawi only, focusing exclusively on the cost of living of female workers in farms.

CfSC realizes that most of the residents in low income countries still live in rural areas and agriculture hires more than half of the labour force. We also realize that women in the horticultural industry live in a male-dominated culture and are not accustomed to claiming their rights as they lack knowledge about labour laws. We, therefore, recognize that there is need to empower women in farms in Malawi considering the fact that it is one of the global value chains that are driven by women.

The dissemination of findings today will provide a room of creating movement that aims at creating debate on the increased gap between minimum wage and living wage and how we can, together, lobby for improved living standard of women workers in Malawi.

Let us all fight for improved wage income among Malawians. It is unfair to see female workers' rights to good life being trampled upon while they wallow in abject poverty.

Thank one, thank you all!

Takulandirani, Tampokererani, Tiwapochere!!

You are welcome to the concerns of the Centre for Social Concern (CfSC)!!!

On the Optional Memorial of Ss. Processus and Martinian