

CCSJ urges the Government to protect the poor and vulnerable in TT's 2012 budget

As the Minister of Finance prepares to deliver his 2011-2012 Budget speech in Parliament on Monday 10 October, the Catholic Commission for Social Justice (CCSJ) urges the Government to approve a budget that will put people first, particularly the poor and vulnerable.

Members of this Commission are aware that, like many countries around the world, TT faces fiscal challenges. The global economic downturn continues apace. TT's currency is linked to the US Dollar. We note that the US economy faces a new recession, according to Lakshman Achutahan, the co-founder of the Economic Cycle Research Institute, USA. He warns: "We are in an era of more frequent recessions... economic recoveries will be more fragile and easily derailed." (see Johnathan Burton's report: http://www.marketwatch.com/Journalists/Jonathan_Burton)

While each citizen may have his/her "wish list" with regard to budget allocation, we must read the signs of the times and act as good stewards of our nation's resources. The recent Global Competitiveness Report (2011) shows that over the past year growth in TT has been minimal. We rank 81 in this Report out of 142 nations.

And although TT ranks 59 out of 170 nations - on the UNDP's Human Development Index (2011) - in the category: *High human development among developing countries*, this ranking offers no comfort to the poor and vulnerable in TT.

Our people are our greatest asset. Pope Benedict XVI calls on nations to promote *integral human development*, that is, the development of all dimensions of a person and of each person. No one should be left behind. For a small nation of just over 1.3 million persons, far too many of our brothers and sisters live in poverty; many are homeless; many are socially excluded.

Over the past few years we have had deficit budgets and this trend may continue in the budget to be announced next week. It is essential that we work towards reversing this trend, as we are stewards also for those who come after us and we should not saddle them with huge debts.

We realise that the Government faces difficult choices. We offer some key principles from the Catholic Church's Social Doctrine to guide our politicians in making budgetary decisions:

1. All decisions should promote and protect *human life and human dignity*.
2. We must have a *preferential option for the poor and vulnerable*. The Catholic Church believes that the moral test of a nation is how it treats its most vulnerable members.
3. In a world in which individualism and selfishness are rampant, we must use the nation's resources to promote *the common good*, that is, to create conditions in which each person can realise his/her potential.

4. *Economic justice* requires that the economy serves the people. Therefore, all budgetary decisions should be underpinned by a consideration of issues such as equity, equality, and distributive justice.
5. Ecological justice requires us to be good stewards of all God's creation. The budget should include a consideration of how we plan to protect our environment not only for ourselves but for future generations.

Whatever total sum is available in our budget, let us use it wisely to improve the quality of life of **ALL** our people. Let us reject the culture of waste; inefficiency and lack of accountability and transparency that exists in certain quarters and which hinders progress. Let us promote, instead, efficiency, effectiveness, excellence and good leadership in the public and private sectors and among all citizens. Now more than ever, every penny counts if we are to take our nation forward.

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