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CIVIL SOCIETY FOR POVERTY REDUCTION (CSPR) ANALYSIS AND POSITION ON THE APPROVAL OF A 24 HOURS ECONOMY BY THE ZAMBIAN CABINET

Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR) has carefully reviewed the Cabinet decision of approving the extension of business and operating hours to 24 hours for business premises, markets, and bus stations. The stated policy intent is to maximise productivity, enhance competitiveness, and create inclusive economic opportunities.

CSPR welcomes the principle that extended commercial hours can create additional earning opportunities for small and micro-traders and citizens at large. We also recognise that this policy is voluntary rather than mandatory: entailing that businesses may extend hours based on their own capacity. Taken in conjunction with Zambia's ongoing moves toward 24-hour border posts and the opening of the Nacala and Lobito trade corridors, as well as the Solwezi–Kipushi road linking North Western Province to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the policy is part of a broader and welcome vision for regional integration and economic expansion.

However, CSPR takes serious concern that a policy of this scale, affecting the livelihoods of millions of vulnerable Zambians including women traders, informal sector workers, youth, and rural communities cannot be

implemented responsibly without detailed guidelines, enforceable legal protections and parallel infrastructure investment safeguards. As of the date of this statement, we note that no such implementation framework has been published.

Implications for Livelihoods and Poverty Reduction

It is our position as an organization that advances pro-poor development policies that an assessment of the 24-hour economy policy must begin with the realities of poverty within the society in which it is being introduced. Zambia's 2022 Poverty Assessment recorded an overall poverty rate of 60% an increase from 54.4% at the time of the previous assessment (Living Conditions Monitoring Survey, 2015). Rural poverty stands at a staggering 78.8%, while urban poverty has also risen to 31.9%. These figures represent real people: market vendors, bus station traders, smallholder farmers, and township entrepreneurs whose survival is measured day by day. It is therefore against this backdrop that the 24-hour economy must be assessed. CSPR recognises that small and micro-traders at markets and bus stations many of whom live below the poverty line stand to benefit from extended hours to earn additional income.

Lessons from Comparable Economies

From evidence gathered, international experience supports a cautious optimism of such a policy direction. Research on Ghana's National Democratic Congress (NDC) 24-hour economy policy found that, with proper planning, the policy can create jobs and improve household welfare through increased production and extended commercial activity; demonstrating that the concept is highly dependent on implementation quality. In the United Kingdom, the "night-time" economy contributes between £17.7 billion and £26.3 billion annually and supports hundreds of

thousands of direct and indirect jobs. In the United States, nearly two in five employees operate within the 24-hour economy system.

However, it is important to note that these economies are underpinned by reliable electricity, robust public transport, strong consumer demand, and mature regulatory frameworks. Zambia does not yet possess all of these prerequisites at scale. CSPR therefore urges government not to replicate the policy form without replicating the enabling conditions.

As CSPR's, we are mandated to scrutinise the labour implications of this policy with equal rigour. We note that Zambia's Employment Code Act establishes a standard working limit of 48 hours per week (8 hours per day) for adults, and makes provision for overtime pay and night-shift allowances. These are important protections. However, enforcement in the informal sector where the majority of Zambian workers operate remains weak and inconsistent. We are therefore concerned that a 24-hour economy, rolled out without accompanying enforcement measures, risks normalising precarious employment: temporary and part-time contracts with no benefits, no health insurance, and no pension provisions. This would not reduce poverty but rather deepen it by locking workers into insecure livelihoods with no safety net. We also categorically oppose any exploitation of minors. Night-time commercial operations must not become a gateway for child labour.

CSPR therefore calls on the Ministry of Labour and Social Security to urgently review the regulatory framework applicable to the 24-hour economy. This review must address the mandatory registration and public disclosure of shift rosters by employers, alongside rigorous enforcement of overtime pays and night-shift allowance provisions. Employment Code protections must be explicitly extended to informal sector

workers, including market traders and bus station vendors. Additionally, minimum wage levels must be reviewed in light of the additional costs transport, security needs incurred by night workers.

CSPR notes with deep concern that Zambia is currently in the grip of a severe electricity crisis with about 80% energy source being hydro and highly vulnerable to climate shocks. We do however acknowledge that in the recent month's efforts have been made to ensure sustained supply of electricity. For a policy premised on round-the-clock commercial activity, the absence of reliable power is not a minor implementation challenge; it is a fundamental contradiction.

The lessons from the past energy challenges late last year and early this year are instructive and sobering. Prolonged blackouts forced businesses to close entirely or rely on costly generators, imposing catastrophic costs on small operators and worsening poverty outcomes. Generator fuel costs, candles, and alternative lighting arrangements do not impact large corporations but harshly affect the most vulnerable traders and micro-businesses that this policy is ostensibly designed to help.

CSPR's is concerned that without a parallel and credible energy stabilisation plan, the 24-hour economy policy will transfer the cost burden of unreliable electricity directly onto Zambia's poorest producers and traders. This would be unacceptable.

Beyond electricity, a number of further infrastructure prerequisites must be addressed before a full rollout can be responsibly pursued. Functioning, energy-efficient street lighting in and around markets, bus stations, and commercial corridors is essential for both safety and commerce. Night-time public transport for shift workers must be planned. E-commerce and cashless payment systems, which are safer and more efficient for night-time

transactions, require reliable mobile and internet connectivity, and this digital infrastructure must be part of the enabling environment.

CSPR conditions its support for full rollout of the 24-hour economy on the government publishing a credible, costed, and time-bound energy stabilization and infrastructure plan that specifically addresses the needs of extended-hours commercial spaces. Further our position is that security in a 24-hour economy is a public good and a government responsibility. It cannot be delegated to individual businesses or traders, who lack the means and authority to provide it. We note that community policing, CCTV coverage, and street lighting are widely cited as minimum baseline requirements for safe night-time commerce. These must be planned, funded, and deployed by government before extended operations become normalised.

Recommendations and conclusion

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, CSPR calls on Cabinet and the relevant line ministries to publish a comprehensive implementation framework immediately. The government must release detailed, publicly accessible guidelines for the 24-hour economy policy including roles and responsibilities across ministries, timelines, compliance standards, and monitoring mechanisms before encouraging widespread business uptake. We further call on Government to convene inclusive, multi-stakeholder consultations. Government must conduct formal, documented consultations with various stakeholders before finalising implementation modalities.

CSPR further calls for Government to engage regional peers in coordinated learning. Zambia should formally engage with Ghana and Kenya both of which are navigating comparable 24-hour economy processes as well as the Southern African

Development Community (SADC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) frameworks, to share implementation lessons, harmonise cross-border standards, and maximise the regional trade benefits of the policy.

Conclusively, CSPR reiterates that we welcome the vision of a more productive, competitive, and inclusive Zambian economy. Extended operating hours, designed and implemented well, can open real pathways out of poverty for the millions of small traders, marketeers, transporters, and service providers who form the backbone of Zambia's informal economy. A poorly designed 24-hour economy will not lift traders out of poverty. It will expose them to crime, exploitation, and unaffordable costs. It will serve to widen the gap between those with resources and those without. CSPR therefore calls on the Government of the Republic of Zambia to pause the promotion of full national rollout until an implementation framework, security plan and energy commitment plans are put in place.

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