

Moving towards a living wage: overcoming apartheid legacies

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Since the late 1980s, the question of a living wage for all workers has been on the agenda of the Namibian labour movement. Progress, however, has been slow and in most workplaces, wage levels are insufficient to enable workers and their families to lead a decent life - free from poverty and deprivation. Despite the Ministry of Labour's commitment to tripartism, collective bargaining and decent standards of work, most Namibian workers still experience severe hardships, especially farm workers, domestic workers, security guards and petrol attendants.

As was the case with other colonial economies, the former Southern West Africa relied on the availability of cheap labour to build and sustain the wealth and lifestyles of a small minority. The marine and mineral wealth was controlled by a group of transnational corporations (TNCs) while the skewed distribution of land benefited a few thousand white farmers. The dualistic structure of the labour market pitted a small group of skilled workers against the vast majority of unskilled and semiskilled ones. The legacies of this structure are still visible today and most Namibian workers still fall into the low skill - low wage category. They are threatened by the huge number of under- and unemployed Namibians and find it very difficult to negotiate better conditions of service as they can easily be replaced by other workers desperate for work.

Some economist have suggested that for Namibia to become internationally competitive, the country should leave the determination of wages to 'market forces' and refrain from protecting workers rights which these economist regard as unnecessary costs for employers and a deterrent to employment creation. This argument suggests that Namibia should attract investments on the basis of low wages and a 'liberalised' labour market that would essentially allow investors to do what they please. This is essentially the model that was implemented in apartheid South Africa, in colonial South West Africa and in several countries in Latin America and elsewhere. Over the last 20-30 years this model has shown to be unsustainable as it keeps countries (and their working people) in a poverty trap and prevents economic growth with equity.

An alternative development strategy would be built around the utilisation of a country's resources to the benefit of its people. This entails a variety of measures such as a redistribution of productive resources and the systematic development of our human resource potential. The latter is linked to the idea of moving from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based one, which is currently being investigated by a study under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education. However, education, training and skills development alone do not guarantee a better life for working people and it is therefore equally important to create a regulatory framework that will ensure decent conditions of work. This entails a guarantee of basic workers rights, minimum wages for

vulnerable workers and strong trade unions that can negotiate better conditions of employment. Wages should not be seen as merely a cost factor in the production process, but also as an essential means of survival for most Namibian households. The labour force survey 2000 revealed that almost half of Namibian households (48%) rely on wages and salaries as their main source of income.

It is encouraging to note that minimum wages were agreed upon between employers and trade unions in the construction industry and the agricultural sector. This is certainly a step in the right direction but there are other sectors where collective bargaining is absent and where workers are exposed to extremely poor working conditions. In such cases, government has to intervene urgently to set legally enforceable minimum standards. However, as implied in the name, minimum wages only provide for the bare minimum standard. Every attempt must be made (especially by trade unions) to move towards a living wage which will allow workers and their families to meet all their basic needs and to live a life free from poverty. The time has come to make a concerted effort to move in this direction by recognising the living wage as a basic human right. Employers (like government) have an obligation to ensure that workers have access to education and training as a means to improve skills (and productivity). Moving towards a living wage by freeing workers from the 'low skill - low wage' trap would also be a gesture that we are determined to put the apartheid legacies behind us.