

Straight Talk (4), August 2011:

The rubbish dump and the BIG

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Villager newspaper

Earlier this month, the media showed shocking pictures of people sifting their way through rubbish dumps in search of food. This drives home the stark reality in the Land of the Brave 21 years after independence: Opulence and desperation co-exist side by side and very little is being done to eradicate poverty. At a public lecture and discussion at UNAM recently, Dr Kalumbi Shangula said that as Namibians we should all put our heads together to discuss what can be done to address poverty. The tragedy is: this has long been done but we seem to lack the urgency and political will to really tackle this problem instead of merely talking about it!

Since independence, Namibia has rolled out several social grants, including old age pensions, veterans subventions, grant for orphans and vulnerable children etc. These grants have helped to alleviate the plight of some Namibians but far too many have remained desperately poor in the face of rampant unemployment that now affects more than half of our population. The Namibian Tax Commission (Namtax) therefore recommended as far back as 2002 the immediate introduction of a Basic Income Grant which will reach everybody in need in Namibia. A broad Basic Income Grant Coalition consisting of the churches (CCN), trade unions (NUNW), youth organisations (NYC) and NGOs (NANGOF Trust, NANASO, LAC and LaRRI) supported this idea as an immediate step to redress poverty.

The BIG is certainly not the only measure to be taken but it is an important starting point. During the many discussions with government and civil society organisations across the country, the Coalition always said that if there were better and more effective ways to fight poverty then the Coalition would support such measures. However, none of those who criticised the BIG has thus far been able to present an alternative that would deal with poverty more comprehensively and swiftly than the BIG! The question thus is: why are we reluctant to implement a BIG when it is affordable, has very low administrative costs and will reach all Namibians immediately? For how long do we still want to debate poverty instead of taking action to eradicate it?

The Basic Income Grant is not a theoretical concept as it was already implemented in the village of Otjivero, just 100 km east of Windhoek. The visible and well documented impact that a BIG of merely N\$ 100 per person per month had on this impoverished settlement is there for all to see. The radical fall of child malnutrition, the improved school attendance and performance and the reduced crime rates are just some of the positive results that the grant had. Perhaps most importantly, the BIG also contributed to people regaining their dignity and self-belief. The about 1000 people living in Otjivero who received the grant are a living testimony that it is indeed possible to address poverty.

Extensive debates and different viewpoints on the BIG are certainly legitimate and also a necessary ingredient of any democracy. However, after debating the BIG for several years, it is no longer acceptable to just lament about poverty and to relocate rubbish dumps to a secret location as a means of dealing with a deep-rooted social crisis. The time for action has come as

we cannot expect our compatriots to suffer the debilitating effects of poverty while policy makers cannot make up their minds on how to tackle poverty. The basis of any sustainable democracy must be human rights, not only in the political arena but also socio-economic rights. As long as a large section of Namibians are relegated to a life in misery (depending on the definition used, between 30 and 80% of Namibians are poor!), the fruits of independence and liberation are only enjoyed by some. As long as over 50% of Namibians are unemployed and destitute, we cannot claim to have achieved a better life for all.

This is the real crux of the matter: are we merely content with the status quo or are we willing to make more fundamental changes to build a different society, characterised by equality and social justice? The answer to this fundamental question will determine which way our country will go. Those who are content with the status quo will certainly continue to defend their privileges and oppose any form of redistribution – even the modest redistribution that will be brought about by a BIG.

For hundreds of thousands of Namibians who are still trapped in poverty, the question of redistribution, social justice and the BIG is an existential question. Sooner or later they will demand answers from their leaders who do not even find it necessary to consult them on issues like the introduction of a BIG. One thing is for sure: with a BIG, nobody in Namibia would be forced to scrape through rubbish dumps in search of food.

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