

The Campaign for a Basic Income Grant in Namibia

Namibia still faces one of the highest income inequalities in the world. Many inhabitants still live in poverty with a bleak outlook on the future alongside a few who have accumulated extreme wealth. Despite the efforts and achievements after independence, food insecurity, malnutrition, overburdened and sometimes inefficient education and health systems, high unemployment rates and low levels of local economic development are still serious challenges. In the absence of economic security for the majority, precarious living conditions and poverty are still widespread.

The Namibian Government's NAMTAX commission of 2002 regarded the reduction of Namibia's income inequality not only as a justice issue, but as a prerequisite for economic growth. Therefore, the introduction of a Basic Income Grant (BIG) to free people from a survival economy was proposed as a matter of urgency. The BIG pilot project in the village of Otjivero in 2008 and 2009 documented the positive social as well economic impact of the grant on food security, education, health, crime and local economic activities. This included the following:

- Since the introduction of the BIG, household poverty has dropped significantly. Using the food poverty line, 76% of residents fell below this line in November 2007. This was reduced to 37% within one year of the BIG. Amongst households that were not affected by in-migration, the rate dropped to 16%. This shows that a national BIG would have a dramatic impact on poverty levels in Namibia.
- The introduction of the BIG has led to an increase in economic activity. The rate of those engaged in income-generating activities (above the age of 15) increased from 44% to 55%. Thus the BIG enabled recipients to increase their work both for pay, profit or family gain as well as self-employment. The grant enabled recipients to increase their productive income earned, particularly through starting their own small business, including brick-making, baking of bread and dress-making. The BIG contributed to the creation of a local market by increasing households' buying power. This finding contradicts critics' claims that the BIG would lead to laziness and dependency.
- The BIG resulted in a huge reduction of child malnutrition. Using a WHO measurement technique, the data shows that children's weight-for-age has improved significantly in just six months from 42% of underweight children in November 2007 to 17% in June 2008 and 10% in November 2008.
- HIV positive residents' access to ARVs was hampered by poverty and a lack of transport before the BIG was introduced. The BIG enabled them to afford nutritious food and gain access to the medication. This was further enhanced by government's decision to make ARVs available in Otjivero, freeing residents from the need to travel to Gobabis, a town situated over 100 km away.
- Before the introduction of the BIG, almost half of the school-going children did not attend school regularly. Pass rates stood at about 40% and drop-out rates were high. Many parents were unable to pay the school fee. After the introduction of the BIG, more than double the number of parents paid school

fees (90%) and most of the children now have school uniforms. Non-attendance due to financial reasons dropped by 42% and this rate would have been even higher without the effects of migration towards Otjivero. Drop-out rates at the school fell from almost 40% in November 2007 to 5% in June 2008 and further to almost 0% in November 2008.

- The residents have been using the settlement's health clinic much more regularly since the introduction of the BIG. The clinic's income from user fees increased fivefold after the introduction of the grant.
- The BIG has contributed to a significant reduction of crime. Overall crime rates – as reported to the local police station – fell by 42% while stock theft fell by 43% and other theft by nearly 20%.
- The introduction of the Basic Income Grant has reduced the dependency of women on men for their survival. The BIG has given women a measure of control over their own sexuality, freeing them to some extent from the pressure to engage in transactional sex.

Based on these results, the BIG coalition argued that a national BIG will break the debilitating shackles of poverty and to free people from precarious survival choices. Economically, the Basic Income Grant will kick-start local economic development based on local production and consumption of basic consumer goods. The Namibian pilot project in Otjivero as well as relevant international experiences demonstrate that such grants circulate within the local economy and thereby shifting buying power and investment capital into the rural areas.

Furthermore, the Basic Income Grant will also mitigate the negative effects of erratic weather patterns in Namibia. The recurring droughts and floods during the last years bear witness to the proneness of Namibia to such natural disasters and climate change. The livelihoods of rural communities depending on subsistence farming or pastoral economy are threatened by such disaster. The BIG provides an important safety net in this regard.

In March 2015, Dr Hage Geingob became Namibia's elected President and appointed the head of the BIG Coalition, Dr Zephania Kameeta, as Minister of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare. There was widespread anticipation that the BIG would finally be introduced at national level. In September 2015, government held a national dialogue on poverty eradication and wealth redistribution across the country during which people repeatedly raised their voices in support of the BIG. However, the BIG was never implemented and does not even feature in the country's social protection policy.

In 2020, the BIG campaign was thus relaunched and the Economic and Social Justice Trust was mandated to take over the coordination of the campaign. Many young activists joined and events were held in various regions across Namibia to create "pressure from below" in support of the campaign. 2024 will be an important year with national parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for November. The BIG Coalition aims to place the BIG firmly on the political agenda through petitions and demonstrations to obtain a political commitment to make the BIG a reality in Namibia.