

Arrest the unemployment crisis – not the youth!

By Herbert Jauch, published in The Namibian, 4 April 2023

The recent 33rd anniversary of our Independence left a bitter taste amongst many Namibians. This was not only because of the food issues at the official event which once again reflected the existing inequalities in our country. Even more disconcerting was the heavy-handed approach of the Namibian police to prevent protest marches against youth unemployment on that day. As pointed out by Norman Tjombe, the right to protest is a constitutional right and the police is merely supposed to deal with administrative issues such as the routes of a protest march. Demonstrations do not have to be “approved” by the police and it is truly an irony of history that the Namibian police tried to justify its draconian action by citing the Public Gatherings Act of 1989. This law was passed in the dying days of the colonial regime and aimed to restrict SWAPO and its allies in the run-up to the first democratic elections of November 1989.

Such laws have no place in an independent Namibia and there was a justified outcry against the heavy-handed approach by the police as well as the prosecuting authorities (which opposed bail for the arrested young activists). It is essential to safeguard our hard-fought rights enshrined in the Namibian Constitution. We must fight the early signs of authoritarianism which tormented so many Namibians before Independence.

The crisis of unemployment

Perhaps even more worrying is the underlying issue of mass unemployment which triggered the youth protest. This is not a new phenomenon but matters worsened over the years. In the 1990s, a tertiary qualification virtually guaranteed employment but today unemployment has reached even those who successfully completed degrees, diplomas and other tertiary certificates. Successive labour force surveys have shown this trend and no politician can claim to be unaware of the unemployment crisis which affects youth and women the most.

Namibia's Vision 2030 envisaged an unemployment rate of 5% by 2030 in stark contrast to our current unemployment rate of around 40-50%. The last official data are from 2018 and do not reflect the job losses during the covid pandemic. Government made some attempts in the past to address the crisis such as the Targeted Intervention Programme for Employment and Economic Growth (TIPEEG) in 2011. Its stated target was to create 104,000 direct and indirect jobs between 2011 and 2014. The budget allocation was N\$ 14, 7 billion and TIPEEG's priority sectors were agriculture, transport housing and sanitation, tourism and public works. In the end, only about 15,000 permanent jobs were created, far short of what was needed to bring relief to the unemployed.

The National Employment Policy (NEP) of 2013 was thus expected to create a much larger number of additional jobs. It presented several strategies to promote employment and decent work. The NEP was not limited to conventional labour market

policies but presented an integrated policy framework which covered macroeconomic and sectoral aspects as well as the institutional aspects in order to create 90,000 additional jobs.

The NEP proposed well targeted public investments as the driving force of economic growth and job creation. Public infrastructure assets were meant to be upgraded and the identified priority areas were agriculture (crops, livestock and agriculture-based industries), electricity (moving towards self-sufficiency and renewable energy sources), housing and water (including sanitation), mineral beneficiation, tourism infrastructure as well as transport and logistics

Increased public expenditure was expected to lead to increased private investments and production in the short and medium term. The reduction of poverty and income inequality was meant to be at the centre of Namibia's economic growth. The NEP aimed to bring about development by utilizing appropriate technologies for the production of goods and services consumed by Namibians. It envisaged to locate production and to expand markets in rural areas to create new jobs across the country.

Despite having a detailed implementation plan, the policy failed to make the envisaged difference. An independent evaluation conducted in 2019 found several reasons for the failure such as a "silo-mentality" in the operations of government, which undermined strategic interventions and the understanding of employment creation as a cross-cutting theme. Government lacked a central agency to guide and evaluate the policy's implementation.

The evaluation also found that State agencies stuck narrowly to their mandates, resulting in poor prioritisation and inefficient resource use. Cross-ministerial meetings were often little more than talk shows which produced no tangible results. Overall, government agencies were unable to reflect on the policy and to improve its effectiveness during implementation.

Any hope for the unemployed?

Such failures haunt Namibia's unemployed today. The President's recent State of the Nation address failed to recognize the magnitude of the problem. Creating 3,000 jobs in the police and army does little for the 400,000 unemployed Namibians, most of whom are young. Unless deliberate interventions are carried out to create a large number of decent jobs and to change economic structures away from extractivism (mining) towards beneficiation and local production, thousands of unemployed Namibians will continue to queue for a handful of jobs. We need bold interventions now, including the utilization of natural resources for public benefits - away from elite capture that only benefits the selected few.

These are the issues we need to confront today. Banning protest marches and arresting the youth is draconian and counter-productive and will certainly not solve the unemployment crisis.

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