



BIG Coalition Launched 2005-04-28

The Basic Income Grant, if and when operational, will be of great benefit to households such as this family. The grant is regarded as a solution to destitution in the country.

By Wezi Tjaronda

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THE Church, labour movement, civil society and AIDS service organisations yesterday launched the Basic Income Grant (BIG) coalition, which will lobby for the introduction of a grant. The grant is regarded as a solution to destitution in the country.

With 75.9 percent of Namibia's population living below the breadline, high unemployment levels as well as high HIV infection rates (19.8 percent), the need for the country's citizenry to get a basic income is more essential now than ever, the stakeholders said.

Noting that poverty was a contributing factor to HIV/AIDS and was also undermining security, the coalition feels that BIG is a necessity to reduce poverty and to promote economic empowerment. Poverty, they agreed, remains the main cause of all social evils that prevent people from participating in the country's economy.

The Coalition comprises four umbrella organisations, namely the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN), the Namibia National Workers' Union (NUNW), the Namibia Non-Governmental Organisation Forum (NANGOF), Namibia Network of AIDS Service Organisations

(NANASO) and two individual organisations, Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) and the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI).

Through the various constituencies of the umbrella organisations, the coalition will mobilise and sensitise people to understand why the country needs a basic income grant to be given out to every citizen of the country.

The organisations say the level of the basic income grant should not be less than N\$100 per person per month, until a person reaches the age of 60 years when they become eligible for an old age pension.

This amount of money would enable parents without an income to send their children to school and it would also enable people to set up income generating projects.

Although critics have it that cash grants would create dependency, Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) Bishop Zephaniah Kameeta submitted that a BIG would create incentives for economic activity and therefore free people from the poverty trap, which forces women to enter into abusive relationships. He says BIG will help them secure a roof over their heads.

The outspoken church leader emphasised that BIG would free people from the poverty trap that forces them to sell their houses because they cannot pay their monthly bills, among many other things.

“We need to overcome the deadly cycle of poverty, which still forces people into dependency, which forces them to bow their heads in order to get some bread crumbs from the table,” said the Bishop.

If viewed in the light of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Peter Naholo, acting general secretary of the NUNW said, there was nothing unbecoming in the implementation of the BIG scheme. The goal of extreme poverty and hunger reduction calls for the halving of people on less than N\$6 per day by 2015. Already, sub-Saharan Africa, in which Namibia falls, is not making any progress.

Naholo said the labour movement supports the struggle for social justice and better living standards of the people. In view of numerous job losses resulting from retrenchments in the country, a basic income grant would serve as an income for workers to fall back on.

“Loss of income means loss of hope. Without hope, life is shattered. Therefore, we need to provide hope for them. We must enable them to appreciate that there is always life after retrenchment,” Naholo added.

According to NANGOF, the bold stance of the new government on public spending should serve as an opportune time for the country to start investing in the livelihoods of the citizens.

Two years ago, the Namibia Tax Commission (Namtax) made a proposal for a basic income grant for Namibia. The consortium was then tasked to review the current tax system and as a redistributive measure, it suggested a BIG.

Having welcomed the proposal, ELCRN resolved to work with the government to further investigate the implementation of the proposal. If implemented, Namibia would be the first country to put such a scheme into practice.