The Basic Income Grant (BIG) as a strategy to reduce poverty and gender inequalities, and enhance educational outcomes in Namibia

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Introduction

When Namibia achieved independence in 1990, about five percent of the population (whites) controlled over 70 percent of the country's GDP, while an estimated two-thirds of the population were living in conditions of absolute poverty (Jauch, 2015). Today, inequality and poverty are still major challenges, and this is evident in the high Gini coefficient of around 0.6[1] and high levels of unemployment (ibid). In 2008, Namibia recorded an overall unemployment rate of 51.2 percent. The situation for women and children is even worse. Youth unemployment reached around 75 percent in 2008 (Jauch, 2015).

The Labour Force Survey of 2012 (Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), 2013) showed an overall unemployment rate of 27.4 percent with a rate of 31.8 percent among women and 52 percent among the youth (Jauch, 2015). However, the Labour Force Survey figures are contested as the methodology used to measure employment gave misleading outcomes. The test for employment was whether a person was engaged in any type of economic activity for only one hour in the week prior to their being interviewed (Jauch, 2015). This included activities such as looking after animals, fixing a fence, catching fish, collecting firewood, repairing household items, etc. (ibid). Anybody engaged in any such activity for one hour was counted as employed, bringing down the official unemployment rate substantially.

Poverty still affects a large number of Namibians. It can be measured in different ways and the methodology used determines to a significant extent who will be considered poor. While the official figures put the poverty rate at about 27 percent of the population, other measures put it as high as 82 percent (Jauch, Edwards & Cupido, 2009). In 2015, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO, 2015, p. 45) reported that 42.3 percent of Namibians were undernourished, an increase of 18 percent since the early 1990s. The FAO also notes that the country has not achieved MDG Target 1c (reduce the proportion of chronically undernourished citizens by half) and has displayed a "lack of progress or deterioration" in this area (pp 45, 57).

No matter which methodology is applied to measure unemployment, inequality and poverty, there is no shortage of reliable evidence gathered over years which shows that these are major issues in Namibia today (English, 2016; Jauch et al., 2009; National Planning Commission (NPC), 2015; Teweldemedhin, 2016). Although there are various social protection measures, including a universal pension that now stands at N$ 1 200 for every person 60 years of age or older, there is still no universal social protection (Jauch, 2015). It is distressing that Namibians outside formal employment are practically excluded from the provisions of the Social Security Act, and many of these individuals are women with children and unemployed youths. Namibia’s widespread unemployment also means that almost half of Namibian households depend on a single wage earner, and thus unemployment has an immediate effect on household survival (Jauch, 2015).

In the economic sphere, the post-independence changes have been overly cautious and far from transformative. Action is needed, especially on the part of Government, to uplift Namibians from poverty and ensure they enjoy a decent standard of living and socioeconomic rights. Only if more women and youths can find employment or secure some stable income, for example, through a Basic Income Grant (BIG), will it be possible for the many poor Namibians to free themselves from inter-generational poverty in which they are still trapped. The story of the BIG in Namibia shows glimmers of hope, as will be shown in this article, but it has not been adopted by the Namibian Government.

BIG proponents and opponents

The first suggestion of a BIG came in 2002 from the Namibian Government’s Tax Commission (NAMTAX) which proposed a universal grant as the most effective way to fight poverty and reduce inequality in a short period of time. NAMTAX pointed out that sustainable economic development would be unachievable if poverty and inequality were not alleviated in Namibia and suggested that the grant be financed through a progressive expenditure tax on the wealthy and on luxury goods (Jauch, 2015; Haarmann et al., 2009; Haarmann & Haarmann, 2005). Namibian civil society organisations, local businesspeople, churches and international agencies recognised the potential of the NAMTAX proposal to benefit the nation and they formed a BIG Collation which continues to advocate for its introduction. The Government showed interest and indicated a willingness to develop a more holistic system of social protection and economic empowerment, although it did not commit to introducing a BIG (Jauch, 2015; Haarmann et al., 2009).

The proposal was that every Namibian citizen have the right to a BIG of not less than N$ 100 (about US$ 12 at the time) per month until they become eligible for the social pension upon turning 60 years of age (Jauch, 2016). The proposed BIG was essentially seen as an effective instrument to fight poverty and to introduce improved economic rights as well as individual dignity. On its own, the amount was insufficient to wipe out poverty. Nevertheless, it would have been enough to guarantee some basic food security and freedom from hunger and thus was a step towards the realisation of the basic right of each person to enjoy a reasonable standard of living, as set out in numerous policy documents to which Namibia is a signatory, including the recent Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 (Absalom, 2016; Jauch, 2015).

The BIG would have required around five to six percent of Namibia’s national budget (equivalent to about three percent of national GDP) which could have been raised through tax adjustments, and calculations done by experts showed that it was viable (Jauch, 2015; Haarmann et al., 2009, p. 16). Considering the benefits discussed in the following section, this would be well worth it. Haarmann et al. (ibid) further explain the situation in 2009:

> An econometric analysis revealed that Namibia's tax capacity exceeds 30% of the national income. The current collection rate is below 25% and thus Namibia's excess capacity to raise tax revenue significantly exceeds the net costs of a Basic Income Grant. This makes the BIG affordable in Namibia.

This and other similar arguments in favour of the BIG were not enough to convince the Namibian Government which has remained divided on the issue (Jauch, 2015). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) stepped in as well and advised against a universal cash grant for Namibia (Isaacs, 2006). The IMF proposed that Namibia consider conditional grant programmes, such as those in Brazil and Mexico. It is noteworthy that, in such cases, financial assistance is "preferably made to female heads of households as they are more likely to spend the money on their children" (Isaacs, 2006).

However, Namibia's situation differed significantly from that of South American nations in the mid-2000s and this is certainly still the case. Thus, Namibia requires a different approach. For example, while Namibia did not meet the MDG target 1c mentioned above, both Mexico and Brazil did (FAO, 2015, p. 12). Namibians' overall food security status is thus much more fragile. Education and employment rates are likewise different. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA, 2017) reports the female youth unemployment rate in Namibia at a staggering 62.2 percent. In Mexico and Brazil, it is significantly lower at 10.3 percent and 18.7 percent respectively (ibid). Even the relative sizes of the three nations' labour forces indicate that they are not in a similar situation economically and demographically. Mexico and Brazil both have over 50 million labourers; Namibia has 1.2 million labourers, comparatively a much smaller labour force (CIA, 2017). Namibia's literacy rate is at 84.5 percent for females who spend an average of 11 years in school (ibid), but this is insufficient to compete in today's global economy and also hampers women and girls' ability to compete in the national economy. On the other hand, Brazilian females spend about 16 years in school, and 92.9 percent are literate; Mexican women and girls spend 13 years in school, and 94.2 percent are literate (CIA, 2017). These are only a few of the differences between the countries, and a closer examination would identify numerous others in terms of culture, gender norms and health.

When the IMF advised against the BIG in 2006, stating it would not be viable, the BIG Coalition contended that IMF officials were unduly influencing and misleading the Namibian Government to block equitable wealth redistribution (Isaacs, 2006). The BIG Coalition showed how the calculations the IMF used to substantiate its claim were inaccurate (ibid). The IMF was thus labelled "an opponent of the poor, which opposed the idea of a BIG strictly on ideological grounds, rather than economic and social considerations" (Isaacs, 2006).

The BIG Coalition realised that it needed to increase pressure by embarking on a visible campaign to convince Government officials. The decision was also taken to start a pilot project in 2008 to provide relevant evidence of whether or not a BIG would be effective and sustainable in Namibia.

The BIG pilot project

The Coalition's chairperson, Bishop Zephania Kameeta, suggested that the BIG be tested in practice and a pilot project be undertaken (Jauch, 2015). A BIG could be implemented on a small scale in a localised area and its impact documented. The chosen location was the settlement of Otjivero, about 100 km east of Windhoek, Namibia's capital city. This settlement of about 1 000 people became the site of the BIG pilot project which ran from 2008 to 2009. It was funded by local and international donations, mostly from churches in Germany (Jauch, 2015).

Many of the Otjivero residents had been former farm workers who lost their jobs and were evicted from the farms with nowhere else to go (Jauch, 2015). Most lived in shacks and poverty was widespread. Following public village meetings, the residents agreed to become the hosts of the BIG pilot phase and embarked on their own process of mobilisation by electing an 18-member BIG Committee to guide the pilot project within their community (Jauch, 2015). The committee consisted of local teachers, the nurse, the police, as well as small businesspeople such as shebeen (unlicensed pub) owners, and other community members. The committee wanted to ensure the best possible impact of the BIG on the lives of individual residents and the wider community, but recipients of the grant had free choice of what to do with the money (Haarmann et al., 2009).

The role of the community in the pilot project was prioritised, and they were fully involved throughout the process. The community felt that, unlike other development projects, the BIG pilot project gave them ownership of the process and responsibility for the outcomes (Jauch, 2015). The role of the BIG Coalition was to facilitate the registration of all residents for the BIG payments, the issuing of smart cards for easy identification and payments, and the documentation of socioeconomic changes resulting from the BIG (ibid).

Pilot project outcomes and relevance to the SDGs

The pilot project researchers (Haarmann et al., 2009, pp 14-17) outline the key changes that occurred after the introduction of the BIG in Otjivero from the 2007 baseline. A critical reflection of some of these outcomes is given below, and their relation to specific UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN-DESA, 2016) is indicated.

1. **SDG 1: Poverty reduction.** *Evidence shows that a national BIG could have a dramatic impact on poverty levels* in Namibia as household poverty dropped significantly during the pilot project. In November 2007, 76 percent of residents lived below the poverty line. This was reduced to 37 percent within one year of the BIG's implementation. An influx of people from other areas to Otjivero also occurred which affected the results. If the BIG were to be implemented on a larger scale, it is reasonable to conclude that poverty levels would drop even further. The BIG is a form of social protection, a poverty reduction strategy and supports pro-poor economic growth. As a national policy, it would greatly assist Namibia in achieving the SDGs to which the country has committed.

2. **SDG 1: Poverty reduction, and SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth.** *The BIG can break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.* The rate of those engaged in income-generating activities increased from 44 percent to 55 percent. *Individuals thus chose not to simply live off the grant but to increase their own economic activities*, particularly through starting their own small businesses including brickmaking, baking and dressmaking. The BIG also contributed to the creation of a local market by increasing household buying power.

3. **SDG 2: End hunger, SDG 3: Health and wellbeing, and SDG 4: Education.** *There are major advantages for child welfare.* The BIG resulted in a *huge reduction in child malnutrition*. A WHO technique was used to measure children's weight-for-age. At baseline, 42 percent of children were underweight. In June 2008, this was down to 17 percent and, just five months later, it was only 10 percent. Furthermore, prior to the introduction of the grant, almost half of the children of school-going age did not attend school regularly, and the pass rate was low. After the grant introduction, more than double the number of parents paid school fees, and most of the children had school uniforms. Some of the most encouraging results are that *school drop-out rates fell to a mere five percent within six months and to almost zero after 12 months*.

4. **SDG 3: Health and wellbeing.** *Healthcare access improved significantly*. The residents started using the settlement's clinic more regularly and were able and willing to pay the N$ 4 fee for each visit. Income of the clinic increased fivefold enabling better service provision. In the past, access to ARVs was hampered by poverty and lack of transport. The BIG also *enabled HIV-positive residents to afford nutritious food* and make use of transport to *reach clinics and thus receive medication*. The Namibian Government later became involved by making ARVs available in Otjivero. Residents no longer needed to travel to a town over 100km away for ARV treatment.

5. **SDG 3: Health and wellbeing, and SDG 11: Sustainable communities.** *Residents started to feel less isolated*. Haarmann et al. (2009) reported that residents did not socialise because they were struggling to feed themselves and avoided one another as they assumed others had only come to beg. A basic income for every person allowed them to start socialising and to trust one another, and the community was thus strengthened. The BIG thus meant that community development could begin, communication among residents increased, and sociological and interpersonal needs could be addressed.

6. **SDG 5: Gender equality, and SDG 10: Reduced inequalities.** *Women's empowerment started to take root.* The introduction of the BIG *reduced the dependency of women* on men for their survival, and it was found that *women also gained greater control over their own sexuality*. This is an extremely important finding regarding gender equity targets. A BIG also means that the *massive gap between the rich and poor of Namibia can finally start to close*.

7. **SDG 11: Sustainable communities.** *A BIG can effectively assist with community mobilisation, offer hope and is thus valuable in sustainable community development.* Case studies of Otjivero residents show that their lives were characterised by unemployment, hunger and poverty before the BIG's introduction. Most residents had settled there because they had nowhere else to go and they saw little hope for the future. However, the introduction of the BIG ignited hope, and the community responded by establishing its own committee to mobilise and advise residents on how to spend the BIG money wisely.

8. **SDG 16: Peace and justice.** *A reduction in crime* was recorded. Overall crime rates, as reported to the local police station, fell by 42 percent. It can also be argued that for poor Namibians, who are in the majority, and those who have been exploited, the BIG is a just provision.

The effects of the BIG on education, child welfare, inequalities and gender aspects in Otjivero are discussed in more detail below.

SDG 4: Education and the BIG

A particularly significant change occurred at the local primary school in Otjivero. Before the BIG, poverty and hunger kept many children from school, and it negatively affected educational outcomes – all too common features across rural African schools. Almost half of the school-going children did not attend school regularly due to financial reasons, and pass rates were low (Jauch, 2015). Many parents were unable to pay the school fees or buy school uniforms. The teachers observed that most learners came to school primarily to receive food and that they stayed away when the school feeding scheme ran out of food (Haarmann et al., 2009).

This changed after the introduction of the BIG. Non-attendance and drop-out rates due to financial reasons fell dramatically while pass rates improved significantly (Haarmann et al., 2009). By the end of the first year of the BIG, the community could, for the first time, send some of the learners to pursue secondary schooling elsewhere (ibid). Even at the local kindergarten, teachers observed significant changes:

> The children come to school clean, on time and well fed. When it is break time we send the children back home to eat and they now come back on time. In the past, when we sent them home, most of them never returned... because the parents did not have food to give them... Before the Basic Income Grant things were really bad and it was difficult to teach the children. Now they concentrate more and pay more attention in class. They are generally happy because they have enough to eat at home – Mathilde Ganas (in Haarmann et al., 2009, p. 69).

Human and other resources available for the primary school and kindergarten remained the same (Haarmann et al., 2009). The introduction of the BIG was the decisive factor leading to an increase in attendance and school fees paid. The case of Otjivero thus shows that a reduction in poverty through a BIG has a valuable compound effect in terms of improved educational outcomes and child welfare.

SDG 5: Gender equality and the BIG

The results of the BIG point to an overall improvement in socioeconomic conditions and they also had a significant gender dimension. Firstly, the BIG for children was paid to their caregivers. These were women in almost all cases because, as is common in Namibia, Otjivero households are mostly matrifocal (Jauch et al., 2009). Femaleheaded households and single mothers are the norm and, thus, women were the primary beneficiaries of the grant, entrusted with resources to provide a decent standard of living for their household (ibid). UNICEF (2007) has pointed out that empowering women and increasing the resources available to them improves child survival rates, nutritional status and school attendance. Likewise, HelpAge International (cited in Haarmann et al., 2009) observed that resources available to children are far greater in households where women are key decision-makers than in those households where men are in control.

Secondly, the BIG allowed women (and men) to escape abusive and exploitative labour conditions. Besides the general gender wage gap in the Namibian labour market, women tend to find themselves concentrated in the worst jobs including those in the informal economy (Jauch, 2015). In Otjivero, domestic and farm work was often the only wage labour available, and women had to endure highly exploitative practices to earn meagre wages. Poverty forced them to accept such conditions as leaving employment would have resulted in immediate hunger and misery. With the introduction of the BIG, women had a secure source of income to survive in the interim period after leaving their jobs which allowed them to look for work elsewhere (Jauch, 2015). Thus the men and women of Otjivero had greater leverage regarding choices for their future.

Thirdly, the BIG provided women with an income that was completely independent of their male partners. In the case of Otjivero, there were many examples of how women's status within households improved significantly as they gained a level of economic power through the BIG (Jauch, 2015). They became less dependent on their male partners and gained far greater control over their own lives, reducing the need for transactional sex. The words of a young Otjivero woman illustrate this. In referring to male farm workers from the commercial farms in surrounding areas, she said:

"When the young strong men come with lots of money, I no longer have to sleep with them to have enough money to buy food for my family. I can send them away now" (Haarmann et al., 2008, p. 89).

Fourthly, the BIG gave women resources to send their children to school, including for Early Childhood Development (ECD). This helps with educational outcomes and allows more women to find employment. One resident said: "We had a crèche with only 13 children last year and this year the number increased to 52 children because many parents now have the money to pay for the children" (Haarmann et al., 2009, p. 68). He further said, "If you go to the primary school, you will notice that most of the children have school uniforms and they are clean and happy" (ibid).

Women's role in the community is vital, but it is also noteworthy that, when provided with a small income, a single father in Otjivero chose to make himself known to the school and was able to pay the school fees. The teacher did not know him before because he avoided contact with the school as he could not pay the fees. When he paid, he proudly said: “Now I want to pay for my child and because I have paid for the school, I will ensure that she performs well” (Haarmann et al., 2009, p. 42). This illustrates how fathers who are empowered with the dignity of a basic income can become involved in their children’s education and make positive education choices on their daughters’ behalf.

Human rights considerations and potential negative effects of a BIG

Criticisms raised against the BIG should be carefully examined in relation to the evidence provided by the Namibian case study. For example, there was a concern expressed that an unconditional grant, such as the BIG, could lead to increasing alcoholism. However, this was not found in Otjivero during the pilot project and is not supported by the empirical evidence (Haarmann et al., 2009). The community committee took pre-emptive steps to kerb alcoholism and reached an agreement with local shebeens not to sell alcohol on the day of the grant payout. Six months after the introduction of the BIG, a local shebeen owner stated:

> The number of shebeens did not increase, in fact there were 8 shebeens before and now there are 7. We know there are many reports that the people are spending the money on alcohol instead of buying food but that is not true at all. We had a few cases when things went out of control but that only happened during the first pay-out. I would say, some people got excited about the money. After that, the [BIG] committee sat and had a meeting with the community and after that nothing serious happened again – Adam Tjatinda, July 2008 (Haarmann et al., 2009, p. 43).

Much can be done to pre-empt such problems, and lessons from other countries can be taken into account in the implementation of the BIG. The researchers explain further:

> the establishment of the BIG committee and the discussion about the potential misuse of BIG money for alcohol has triggered a conscientisation process within the community. Shebeen owners are on the BIG Committee and there are open discussions about alcohol abuse (Haarmann et al., 2009, p. 44).

The final decision remains with the individual as to how they will use their grant, but concerns that a BIG would do more harm than good are not based on the available evidence. The possibility that some individuals may not spend their grant wisely does not seem sufficient reason to forgo all the evidence-based advantages and improvements identified above. It is unsound reasoning to sacrifice the human rights of the majority based on the assumption that a minority may not make wise financial decisions.

It is beyond doubt that the BIG has had a significant impact on reducing the dehumanising levels of poverty experienced by the residents of Otjivero and it does not seem fair to make assumptions which further prejudice these individuals. It is important that, first and foremost, the voice of the Otjivero residents be heard. Jonas Damaseb, a local resident, highlights that the BIG achieved a crucial human rights outcome for the people of Otjivero. He stated:

> Generally, the BIG has brought life to our place. Everyone can afford food and one does not see any more people coming to beg for food as in the past. What I can say is that *people have gained their human dignity and have become responsible* [own emphasis] (Haarmann et al., 2009, p. 41).

What next?

Encouraged by the pilot research results, the BIG Coalition was optimistic that it could convince the Namibian Government to introduce a national BIG. However, the Government has remained reluctant to do so and, instead, announced the introduction of food banks which is currently being implemented in poorer areas of Windhoek (Nakale, 2017).

Nevertheless, far more must be done and on a greater scale, especially in the rural areas. Despite the empirical evidence and the calls for the BIG during the national dialogue on poverty and redistribution in 2015, Government officials seem to regard the BIG as an unaffordable welfare measure while the IMF continues to caution Namibia's policymakers against implementation (Jauch, 2016). The IMF concedes that the way the Namibian Government decides to address poverty is a public policy choice and it claims only to act in an advisory capacity (Isaacs, 2006). It should be noted here that, since 2006, the IMF has not provided substantiated evidence as to why the BIG would be disadvantageous to Namibia.

For the inhabitants of Otjivero, the Government's refusal to implement a national BIG means that they remain vulnerable. For several years, the BIG Coalition had managed to raise funds, mainly from churches internationally, to sustain the BIG at a reduced level but funding ran out in 2014.

Taking into account inflation, the BIG today would have to be set at not less than N$ 250 (currently around US$ 18) per person per month. This will have to be adjusted annually in line with inflation and GDP growth. A national BIG could be paid through the National Post Office's savings system in a highly cost-effective manner (Jauch, 2016).

At N$ 250 per person per month, the costs for a national BIG will be about two to three percent of Namibia's GDP and five to six percent of the national budget. This is far less than what Namibia currently spends on interest payments for its loans, and the BIG is still affordable. It can be financed through the national budget, based on a variety of sources such as income tax, corporate tax, a natural resource tax and levies on luxury goods.

Considering the available evidence, a BIG will certainly lead to an immediate improvement in the living conditions of the majority of Namibia's population. It is a contribution to redressing some of the structural economic injustices, and a means to foster economic inclusion. It will improve health conditions, educational outcomes and women's emancipation in line with SDG 3, 4 and 5 respectively, and make significant contributions to numerous other SDG targets. The BIG contributes towards the realisation of socioeconomic rights, human dignity and improved standards of living. Its implementation would signal a commitment towards building a more inclusive society and what is required now is the political will to roll-out the grant.

Note

1. The Gini coefficient is used to measure the deviation in the distribution of income among individuals or households in a country from a situation of perfect equality. A value of 0 represents complete economic parity with everyone having the same. A value of 1 shows absolute inequality with one person having everything (UNDP, 2015, p. 65).

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