

“One that has given you little has your soul consoled” – Unemployed youth on surviving without unemployment benefits in Namibia

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Abstract

Alarming, youth unemployment rates in Namibia are among the highest in Southern Africa. This fact haunts Namibia terribly. The unemployment of those that should be the main bread winners does not only affect them as individuals, but also bears a negative impact on their families and friends. With poor access to productive assets such as capital, land and skills, the majority of the unemployed youth face a daily struggle to meet their basic needs and are often the ones on the periphery of the Namibian society. The difficulties in finding employment also mean difficulties in securing an income and a decent livelihood for these young people. In absence of a social protection system for unemployed people in Namibia, the situation of the youth is exacerbated. This study seeks to understand the social support system and survival strategies of the unemployed youth in Namibia. It draws data from the author’s on-going PhD research for which she conducted interviews with unemployed youth from Ohangwena and Khomas regions, with the aim to capture the lived experiences as well as the views of young people on the problem of youth unemployment in Namibia. The results point to the practical difficulties of unemployment the youth experience in their everyday lives. Findings indicate that the majority of youth are the most likely to fill low-quality jobs in the menial and informal economy rather than jobs with decent wages and benefits. In as much as the youth are engaging in the informal employment and economy, they do not regard it as employment. Consequently, many rely on family and friends for support in order to survive unemployment. As an onset to assist the unemployed, the author therefore propose the Basic Income Grant (BIG) as one way of socio-economic safety of the poor and unemployed as they persevere with their unemployment. Such an initiative can ameliorate the negative effects of unemployment specifically among the youth. This however, should not be regarded as a replacement for the possibility of unemployment benefit.

1. Introduction

Youth unemployment is one of the most important socio-economic and political issues in Namibia today. The difficulties in finding employment mean difficulties in securing an income and decent livelihood for young people. In addition, with poor access to productive assets such as capital, land and skills, the majority of the unemployed youth face a daily struggle to meet their very basic needs. Namibia does not have a comprehensive social protection system, particularly social security benefits for unemployed people. Social protection systems in Namibia depend on employers’ and employees’ monthly contributions and in the case of non-contribution, it is limited to orphans and vulnerable children, pensioners and war veterans. As a result, the unemployed, particularly the youth, are left out. The motto of Namibia’s current President is “no one should be left out of the Namibian

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E-mail: nnamupala@unam.na “Ekupa kashona ekuxunga omwenyo” (One that has given you little comforts your soul). Direct translation of Oshiwambo proverb used by one of the research participants.

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house”. While this motto seems very inclusive, the reality of a “*Namibia house for all*” may well be a mirage considering that the majority of young Namibians are unemployed and impoverished.

The desperate situation for the multitudes of unemployed and poor youth has the potential to bring about social strife and insecurity in the country. For instance, the youth uprising that led to the Arab Spring in 2010 was started by a frustrated youth protesting against unemployment and difficult economic situation (Honwana, 2013). In addition, the emergence of social and political movements such as Affirmative Repositioning (AR) during the past months is also linked to the increasing socio-economic inequality that particularly affects the youth in Namibia. Therefore, in order to have an inclusive “*Namibian house for all*”, there is a need understand how the unemployed survive and consider measures that address the problem of unemployment and social exclusion by putting emphasis on the development of the social insurance system for all.

The current situation is that youth unemployment is a major problem prevailing in both rural and urban areas of Namibia. As a result, it is essential to understand the social support systems and survival strategies of the unemployed youth in the absence of unemployment benefit. Drawing from the author’s on-going PhD research, data was collected from the unemployed youth in Ohangwena and Khomas regions. The aim of the study is to capture the lived experiences as well as the views of young people on the problem of youth unemployment in Namibia with the goal to provide a better understanding of its prevalence. According to Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA) unemployment is broadly defined as all those within economically active or working age groups that are without work but available for work and actively or not actively seeking work, whereas an employed person is defined as one who has worked for pay, profit, or family gain for at least one hour during the seven days preceding the survey interview (NSA, 2015b). Even though Namibia defines youth as those aged 16-35 years (National Youth Council, 2009) for the purpose of this study youth refer to those aged 15-34 years. This is because Namibia uses 15 years as the lowest level and 34 years as the highest level for discussions on youth (un-)employment, as well as other official documents and surveys. Therefore, the term ‘youth unemployment’ represents the number of unemployed young people aged 15-34 years, as a percentage of the total labour force, where the total labour force comprises the unemployed and the employed (NSA, 2015a; Namupala, 2016). The terms Youth and young people are used interchangeable in this study.

2. Literature Review

It is well known in the literature that many young people are at a disadvantage in the labour market (NSA, 2015a); ILO, 2012; Yates, 2008; Celik, 2008). The youth have more difficulties finding a job, they have longer periods of unemployment and, if they are employed, they often have lower prestigious jobs and lower earnings compared to other population groups (ILO, 2012; O’Higgins, 2001; Hammer, 1993). According to Stamm (2006) unemployment has become a reality for so many young people, thus making them a generation that has been cheated. Hammer, (1993) argued that, although many studies support the fact that young people are less experienced and less skilled than adults, and thus more vulnerable to unemployment, this argument applies to adults as well and thus cannot explain the high incidence of unemployment in the younger age groups. There have been various suggestions as to why young people are so disadvantaged in the labour market. Some researchers suggest that a lack of skills and knowledge about where to find jobs, attitudes of employers and labour regulations are some of the hurdles attributing to youth labour market disadvantages (ILO, 2010; Mwinga, 2012; Denu, Tekeste & Van der Deijl, 2005) Others argue that young people with the lowest qualifications are most likely to become unemployed and experience longer and repeated periods of unemployment (O’Higgins,

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2001; ILO, 2010b). In the case of Namibia, young people face a job market that is too small to absorb the youth of Namibia (NSA, 2015a; Mwinga, 2012; Kanyenze & Laperye, 2012). Gonzo & Plattner (2003) found that many of the Windhoek street unemployed were young people who have never been employed in Windhoek. This, they argue, is an indicator that the Namibian economy and the formal employment sectors are not growing fast enough to absorb the majority of Namibian school leavers (Gonzo & Plattner, 2003). According to Hess, et al. (cited in Gonzo & Plattner, 2003), unemployed youth are often excluded from leisure activities undertaken by their working peers due to a lack of financial resources and as a result, they are often alienated from the structured world of work and social activities they have been accustomed to (Hess, et al., 1994 as cited in Gonzo & Plattner, 2003). Supporting this argument is (Ribton-Turner & DeBruin, 2006) who maintain that the unemployed person who after an extended period of time without work, were virtually without resources to support the usual requirements of living such as shelter, food or family responsibility, became more isolated and withdrew from social interaction. They however pointed out that unemployed with limited financial resources interact socially, having the means to participate, and used hobbies, sporting, family activities to structure their time (Ribton-Turner & DeBruin, 2006). The experience of unemployment is a complex process that varies across individuals (Jahoda, 1982). Other studies (Celik, 2008; ILO, 2012a; Namupala, 2014) have also shown that the unemployment experience of youth is heterogeneous and is influenced by factors such as marital status, region, gender, educational level and family.

2.1 Specific situation of youth in Namibia

Namibia is currently experiencing a significant and unprecedented shift in demographic composition characterised by a rapidly growing youth population aged between 15 and 34 (NSA, 2012a). The proportion of youth to the general population is currently the highest than at any other point in history, with the growth being mostly recorded in Khomas region (NSA, 2012a). However, the rapid growth in the proportion of youth in the population has not been met by a corresponding growth in economic opportunities for the youth, thereby creating an equally historic number of unemployed youth (NSA, 2015a; Chandan, et al., 2008). The economic growth has averaged between four and five per cent (National Planning Commission, 2015), however, it has been a jobless growth (NSA, 2015a; Schlettwein, 2016). The economy has not been able to sufficiently create permanent jobs, or dent the upward trend in youth unemployment (Nghikembua, 2012). The employment opportunities available for many youth are low paying, with the informal arrangements surrounding the job engagements assuring little security of tenure in those positions.

The Namibia Labour Force Survey (NLFS) report of 2015 estimates that 28 per cent of the people aged above 15 years were unemployed as of 2014 (NSA, 2015b). According to the report the country has about 830, 000 youth aged 15-34 of whom 320, 000 are employed while 205, 000 are unemployed. Thus, this group has a labour force participation rate of about 64 per cent (ibid.). The report has a sex differentiation in that female youth unemployment is higher than that of male youth (NSA, 2015b). The data also indicate that the rate of unemployment decreases as one advances in age as illustrated in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Employment indicators for youth aged 15-34 years, by sex and by age group (%)

Age groups	Labour participation rate			Employment to population ratio			Unemployment rate		
	Female	Male	Both sexes	Female	Male	Both sexes	Female	Male	Both sexes
15- 19 Teens	18.6	19.0	18.8	4.9	8.6	6.7	73.9	54.7	64.3
20-24 VibrantYouth	68.7	69.4	69.1	31.0	37.3	34.1	54.8	46.2	50.6
25- 29 PrimeYouth	86.7	91.1	88.9	54.1	64.7	59.3	37.6	29.0	33.3
30-34 MatureYouth	89.1	95.6	92.3	60.2	76.7	68.2	32.4	19.8	26.1
Total	62.3	64.7	63.5	34.5	42.8	38.6	44.6	33.8	39.2

Sources: (Namupala, 2016; NSA, 2015b)

The mature youth (30 – 34 years) indicate a lower unemployment rate of 26 per cent when compared to the rest of the youth group (*ibid.*). This can, to some degree, be traced to the notion that after a long period of unemployment, this cohort is likely to recourse into informal economy and/or employment due to the pressure of earning an income and becoming independent (Namupala, 2016). The group most affected by unemployment are the teenagers, which are those between the ages of 15 - 19 years, at an astounding 64 per cent (NSA, 2015b). This is also the age group that is supposed to be in school and yet it is the most vulnerable to a downturn in labour market conditions due to their lack of qualifications and work experience. The high rate among this group is attributed to the grade 10 and 12 failures (Namupala, 2014). It has been acknowledged that many young Namibians do not pass grade 10 and 12 examinations and, as a consequence, the majority of them are likely to become new entrants to the labour market as they are pushed or aged out of the secondary school system, due to the no-repeat, into the formal education system policy. This policy is however subject to certain exceptions such as those who are below age 16 years may be allowed to repeat on a fulltime mode depending on the availability of space in the formal schooling. These high school failures are encouraged to enrol at other educational institutions such as Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) and those who do not manage to be absorbed by NAMCOL or other educational institutions attempt to enter the labour market often to no success. As a result, more young people are becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). This is evident as currently the share of youth in NEET is about 24 per cent of the youth population (NSA, 2015b). According to Namibia Statistic Agency (2015b), NEET rate is intended to reflect those youth who are not part of the labour force for reasons other than education and training. Among females, this is said to include reasons related to household chores and responsibilities as well as childbearing and child care (NSA, 2015b). Many of these school leavers strive to find employment so that they can sustain themselves, and their families, in some cases. As a result some of these youth are particularly vulnerable to becoming or remaining unemployed as they have neither the academic qualification nor the required work experience (Namupala, 2014). This is a challenge for them especially that education and training complemented by some work experience seen as the primary means of securing employment in Namibia. A regional comparison reveals that there is a significant difference between the rural (44.2%) and urban (35.3%) youth unemployment rate (NSA, 2015b). The difference in urban and rural paths to employment is largely caused by constraints that are unique to rural settings. For instance, there is a lack of development opportunities in rural areas and thus the youth have an inadequate choice of professions compared with the urban areas. As a result, it is common to

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find rural youth employed in subsistence agriculture and family based livelihood activities, such as cattle herding, selling kapana, (cuca)shops (Namupala, 2014). Most of rural economy, particularly in Oshanaana, is based on subsistence farming, where the population engages in crop farming and cattle herding, which is often for household consumption only. Even though the subsistence farmers have been classified as employed, according to NSA’s revised definition of employment (NSA, 2013), rural people’s access to employment is still limited. Furthermore, Namibia’s rural areas seem to be unable to attract new employers and industries that can create employment. The problem of accessing financial resources, such as loans to start a business, is still a major problem in most rural areas of Namibia. Consequently, many young people from rural areas arrive in the cities believing that more jobs and better social opportunities are available in urban areas. Nonetheless, the majority of these young people still find themselves without a job and often marginalised, thus exacerbating urban unemployment.

2.2 Vulnerable employment and working poor

The problem of unemployment is compounded by the fact that many of Namibia’s employed workers fall into the category of vulnerable employment and the “working poor” (NSA, 2015b). These are people who work on a full-time basis but are unable to meet their basic needs. According to NSA (2015b), vulnerable employment and the working poor measure those with relatively precarious working situations. Vulnerability in this context also means a decrease in employment opportunities and job security, lack of social protection, deprived survival situations and wellbeing of young people in their everyday lives. This group is considered more vulnerable due to the unlikeliness of them to get formal work arrangements, or access to benefits or social protection programs, and they are often more at risk from the effects of the economic cycles (NSA, 2015b). Šileika, Rupšys and Gruževskis (2004) argue that young people are forced into taking up low capacity or casual jobs to earn a living. They maintain that higher employment levels among people in developing countries are achieved at the expense of the quality of life of the youth population (*ibid.*). This is perhaps why about 30% of the total employed youth are in vulnerable employment (NSA, 2015b). Based on NSA’s surveys, most of the vulnerable workers are subsistence farmers, or own account workers. In terms of gender, rural women are likely to be in vulnerable employment. This is emphasised by the fact that vulnerable employment is calculated as “the sum of contributing workers and own account workers of the total employment” (NSA, 2015b, p. 65). Contributing to family work is a status that is frequently dominated by women. It is also essential to point out that, according to the 2014 NLFS report, about 16 per cent of Namibia’s households depend on subsistence farming as the main source of income (NSA, 2015b). Therefore, although deemed as employed, the vulnerable and working poor face daily difficulties to ensure their minimum survival due to the precarious work conditions often with no hope of social mobility. While most monthly salaries of formal sector workers range from N\$1,000 – 5,000, many thousands of workers such as farm workers, domestic workers, petrol station attendants and security guards earn below N\$100 per month (Jauch, Edwards & Cupido, 2011). In the informal economy, wages range around just N\$300 per month (*ibid.*). This means that the struggle for survival does not only affect the unemployed, but also many vulnerable workers often in full-time jobs.

2.3 Social Support System of Unemployed Youth

Studies (Waters & Moore, 2002; Celik, 2008; Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 2009; Namupala, 2014) have shown that social support is an essential aspect of the coping process during periods of unemployment and the unemployed persons who receive some kind of social support are said to handle their unemployment experience better than those with no social support. Family, friends and neighbours are regarded as the key support system for the unemployed youth (Namupala, 2014; Celik, 2008). When a family has financial difficulties or are in need of moral support, close relations and social networks can be very important

sources of support for the unemployed (Chen & Wu, 2006; Celik 2008; Lorenzini & Guigni, 2010). The unemployed who had extended family support tend to be more positive about their unemployment experiences, mostly because the family becomes a strategy to cope with unemployment with the unemployed given information about potential job opportunities and encouragement to keep seeking work (Namupala, 2014). In as much as these informal social support systems are necessary for the unemployed, the multiple hardships experienced by families as a result of unemployment and precarious employment, affect the various forms of support provided. That is to say, close to 30 per cent of the working population is unemployed and those who are employed have an average wage of about N\$6 600 (NSA, 2015b). Furthermore, the absence of social security benefit for all exacerbates the lack of social support for the unemployed youth.

As a way of expanding the social safety net to include the unemployed and the poor, a Basic Income Grant (BIG) was proposed and piloted by a coalition of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and international partners in 2009, which targeted the population living in Otjivero. The community project was initiated to support local communities after a lay-off of the majority of workers from farm work (Haarmann & Haarmann, 2012). Before the establishment of the BIG pilot project, many people lacked housing and shelter facilities because of lay-offs from jobs, prevailing unemployment and absence of any other employment opportunities. However, the settlement offers them land to practice subsistence farming to support their lives (Haarmann & Haarmann, 2012). Furthermore, members of the scheme share experiences with other communities to encourage them to start similar projects because they generate substantial benefits. The BIG project represented a positive step towards reducing the rates of unemployment and subsequently alleviating poverty. However, despite the effectiveness of this program, the Namibian government showed a silence over embedding it into the national economic policy when the NGOs ran out of funds to further support this program. At the end of the pilot project, Haarmann and Haarmann (2012) maintained that the introduction of the BIG project has led to an increase in economic activity and a drop in household poverty as BIG enabled recipients to increase their work, both for pay, profit or family gain as well as self-employment. They argued that a national BIG program would have a dramatic impact on poverty levels in Namibia (Haarmann & Haarmann, 2012). This could play a vital role towards the informal social support system, such as family supporting the unemployed youth.

3. Research process

This research is based on a qualitative study which aimed at capturing and understanding the lived experiences of unemployment from the perspective of the unemployed youth. It is for this reason that the research techniques used for data collection were the diary research method (DRM) and focus group interviews (FGI). These methods place a great importance on young people's own interpretations and explanations of their unemployment situations and as such provide the researcher with very personal and richly descriptive stories of their lives as unemployed youth. In the research diaries, for instance, participants exhibit their daily activities, such as how they spend their time, location of such activities as experienced, and the people with whom the activities were performed. Focus group interviews are of immense value in this study since they emphasise the in-depth information and holistic description of unemployment from the perspective of the unemployed youth. Prior to their implementation, instruments were translated into Oshikwanyama and Afrikaans. The same instruments were used for both the Ohangwena and Khomas youth. The researcher arranged a day to explain the different instruments procedures and processes to the participants, emphasising that the main purpose is for participants to express their views and experiences regarding unemployment. In the case of the research diaries, the sample was biased towards literate participants and those willing to open up about their experiences by writing about it. Participants were asked to keep a diary for 14 days, where

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they were required to record their daily experiences, their aspirations and attitudes towards finding a job as well as their survival strategies. The diary was semi-structured, with guiding questions that allowed participants to record activities and events in their own words and at their own time and pace. The focus group interviews were specifically aimed at determining whether unemployment is experienced similarly among the different youth groups. Furthermore, the aim was to understand how young people discuss the problem of unemployment among themselves and how they make sense of their everyday lives as unemployed youth. Participants were allowed to express themselves in whatever language they felt comfortable with and, therefore, data analysis also included translations, in some cases direct translations in order to avoid losing meaning. It was also essential for FGI to specifically target the illiterate youths.

4. Research findings

Even though the overall PhD research project aims at capturing young peoples' views on the problem of unemployment in Namibia as well as their lived experiences of being unemployed, what follows next are participants' reflections that focused on how unemployed youth survive unemployment in the absence of social protection systems in Namibia, such as unemployment benefits. Stories of these unemployed youth provide a deeper understanding of, and glimpse into, their experiences of unemployment at the time when they should be at the most productive in their lives. The detailed methodological approach is in the author's on-going dissertation (Namupala, 2016). Nonetheless, data was analysed from forty-three diaries from Khomas and forty-nine diaries from Ohangwena regions. The three focus group interviews per region were also analysed with a particular focus on what the author calls *survivalism and social support systems*. The overall study consisted of participants aged 17-34 years. The majority had dropped out of school and have never been in full time employment. Many have been unemployed for more than 12 months, thus indicating that youth unemployment is of a long term nature in the two regions. Even though youth are a heterogeneous group and these participants are from different socio-economic backgrounds, their views on the problem of unemployment in general, and youth unemployment specifically in Namibia, are generally similar and thus it is of concern for them. They pointed out their vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion, among other challenges.

4.1 Life of an unemployed young person

Analysis from both research diaries and FGI shows that all participants made references to the practical difficulties of unemployment they experience in their everyday lives. This was mainly because of their inability to find a job and to do basic things that are needed in everyday life, such as putting food on the table and improving their livelihood. Many of them shared similar stories of hardships, frustrations, feeling of powerlessness, self-blame, disappointment, regret and the struggle to survive as they navigate through their trajectories of unemployment. Participants compared their situations to those of their peers and expressed feelings of passivity and isolation. Many of them wonder whether their lives would change for the better:

“It is difficult to be unemployed, because everyone has to use money for everything like eating is bought with money, drinking is money, grandmother not feeling well is money, if I stay in this awkward life I will not live well” (Ohangwena, male aged 26).

“Today I felt bad about my joblessness and it hurt me more when I watched other people going to work to earn a living, while I did not have any work... I spoke to my friend. We discussed, when one said he is going to town to buy his food, and pointed out which type he was going to buy, while another person said he is going to Owambo to visit his family, because it has been since he went back home due to work commitment, while me I was just there looking around and feeling lost just thinking deep about my predicament” (Khomas, female aged 23).

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“People who are not working always become unfriendship with other people who are at work and always be respect less people ... To be unemployed most of people they will not be friendship, because I don't have something to give them. Unemployment always makes a person running up and down looking for something in his basic need from person to person or house to house. Unemployment always make a person powerless, you become unhealthy body” (Khomas, male aged 33).

“I am tired of my unemployed situation especially because my life is difficult and very bleak or hot as if in the fire. My life is also heavy just like one is carrying a heavy load... I have endured a tough life without a job, I cannot take it any more” (Ohangwena region, male aged 27).

These emotional reactions from young unemployment people were displayed by all participants from both Ohangwena and Khomas regions. Findings in this study reflect similar findings from other scholars (see, e.g., Jahoda, et al., 2009; Fryer & Ulla, 1987) who, in their studies of unemployed people, have demonstrated the negative social and health effects resulting from unemployment. On the other hand, in as much as the unemployed youth pointed out the socio-psychological challenges resulting from their unemployment, there are also unemployed youth who expressed great aspirations, and thus see unemployment as sustainable trajectory geared towards resilient survival strategies which enable the unemployed to deal with the difficult situations in their everyday lives. These coping mechanisms include participating in other social interactions, such as volunteerism and sports activities.

4.2 “Omutumba efete” - Idleness will never yield productivity

Participants for this study seem to be busy, as opposed to the notion that unemployment causes idleness. Bearing in mind that unemployment in Namibia is of long term in nature, it is not surprising that many of the study participants engage in some form of survival activities as they cannot afford to remain idle, given the fact that Namibia has no comprehensive unemployment benefits, particularly not for those who are outside the special population (elderly, OVCs, disabled, War Vets). This means that there is hardly any unemployed young person who can afford long term unemployment. Consequently, this necessitates the unemployed youth to find alternatives of dealing with their unemployment situations as illustrated below:

“Having no job meant to much change in my life today, but taught me a lot to just not sit home, but try something to meet my needs” (Khomas, female aged 28).

“Today I spent the whole day washing clothes of the elderly as well as their blankets and I also pounded Mahangu flour for them and they gave me something as token of appreciation” (Ohangwena, female aged 27).

I didn't go look for work today again because I went to attend training for child line care.... To have more information about how to take care for your child since you are unemployed.... Making sure my life is going on by participating in anything around my location, just to make myself busy and hard work... I do my personal work everyday life and do voluntary work in the location for the sake of unemployed youth (Khomas, female aged 27).

“I was busy chopping firewood and walk around to sell it” (Ohangwena male aged 26).

¹Omutumba efete” Idleness will never yield productivity (direct translation of an Oshiwambo metaphor used by some participants)

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The quotations above reveal that what they do with their time means household chores, volunteering, attending workshops and hobbies replace formal work in the participants' lives. The diary analysis revealed that in a week, they also rotate job searching with small businesses, meaning that a day will be dedicated to job hunt, and two or three days will be used to keep the *kapana* business going, as well as doing household chores. It also means that they tend to combine job search with income generating activities. Nonetheless, there are still those who remain idle in their everyday lives.

4.3 Informality

Informality represents the desperation of people for survival. Even though Namibia acknowledges that it has high unemployment rates of 28%, the majority of people work in the informal economy, which is not considered as employment by many of the participants in this study. Namibia has a wide range of informal employment opportunities for semi-skilled labourers (UNICEF, 2015). According to 2014 labour force report, 41.1 per cent of Namibian employed population are in the informal economy of which almost 38 per cent are female and 44 per cent males. The rate is even high in urban area as about 59 per cent them are employed in the informal sector compared to 19 per cent of rural employed population. This shows that the informal economy in Namibia is growing fast, and this is due to the formal economy's inability to create sufficient and sustainable employment opportunities. Most people who dwell in rural areas practice subsistence farming that provides them with passable food supply and extra amounts for sales to meet household necessities. The participants perceive themselves unemployed despite their earnings from informal jobs.

The informal employment has become a temporary safety net for most of the unemployed youth as it is difficult to find employment in the formal sector. For other participants, hustling also mean to rely on temporary or casual work and many of them seem willing to take up undesirable jobs just to survive:

“I spoke to one gentleman who was looking for a person to work for him we agreed about work I accept the income I was going to get just because I was desperate. I could see that the income is small and it will not be enough” (Ohangwena male aged 27 years).

“I kept on looking for work opportunities in the villages like that of make traditional huts, brickmaking or cutting wood in the bush and sell these. I ask my friends where there is construction work so that I can go there to ask for help. I received a call from my friend with whom I worked before. He called just to ask where I was and I told him I was in Owambo. He told me he had been given building work at Okongo and thought perhaps that I have already gone back to the south he said he was looking for someone to work with because there was nobody to help him that time. He called me to go and work with him but my phone battery was flat that day” (Ohangwena, Male aged 26 years).

“I was somehow good somehow bad, the good things the manager at Namib Mills tells me to go and work for two days at the company” (Khomas, male aged 30 years).

“People are asking for experience at work and the level of education but where I got work the salary is too little while the work is like the work of dig stump from the ground, cutting of trees and sweeping in home” (Ohangwena, Male aged 30 years).

Study participants also complained about the low wages, while the work is said to be difficult and too much, saying it is impossible to decline when they have nothing else to survive on. Those who are unable to sell or do other ad hoc jobs usually go into Central Business Districts (CBDs) or wherever, just to see whether they will find something to survive on. This often means begging on the street:

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“I have been walking throughout the town seeing whether I will find someone with the heart of gold who could help me with something that I can use to buy some basic things” (Ohangwena, Female aged 29 years).

Many of them tend to combine job search with income generating activities. It is also viewed as a way of getting money for transport fares when looking for work:

“As I am here I do not sit around doing nothing whatsoever even though I have been searching for work, I also had made vetkoekies for sale to earn income to help myself” (Khomas, female aged 22).

Owing to the desperate situation in which they find themselves, the majority of unemployed youth accept any job and engage in any activities, however unfulfilling, just to earn an income. Most of the activities are such that, according to the Labour Force Surveys defined as employment. However, these young people do not regard it as employment, but a mere way of staying alive, whilst in search for employment. For most of these young people, employment is when a person has a regular monthly wage and job security. This raises the question about the much debated definition of an employed person, and whether the definition used by NSA reflects the reality of young people in Namibia’s labour market. Listening to the stories of the unemployed youth and what it means to be unemployed, the majority of them disagree with this definition. In fact, this definition suggests that there is no unemployment in Namibia as indicated here. Instead, most unemployed people are engaged in some sort of economic activities in order to survive.

4.4 Namibia needs unemployment benefit

Poverty, inequality and unemployment remain high in Namibia, specifically for certain parts of the population and certain regions of the country. The inequality rate (Gini coefficient 0.597) remains among the highest in the world (NSA, 2012b), although Namibia is ranked as an upper middle income country. Youth are the most likely to fill low-quality jobs in the menial and informal sectors of the economy, rather than jobs with decent wages and benefits. In addition, access to education remains the main challenge for unemployed youth striving to compete for limited employment opportunities in the labour market. Low education achievement and scanty skills endowment for youth in the poorer segments of society, often limit their access to social capital within their communities. In this context, informal social support exists as grandparents are providing care and support to their grandchildren and social support to orphaned children by their relatives, as well as economic support by individuals in comparatively better conditions to poor relatives and neighbours, and sharing of valuable assets with family, relatives and neighbours. Moreover, there are exchanges of soft loans, gifts, cash in return of food items among family members living in urban and rural areas, and exchange of gift items on weddings and funerals as social traditions (Chiripanhura & Niño-Zarazúa, 2013). However, these informal channels of support are inadequate in the face of robustly changing societies and their basic needs. The following are participants’ illustrations of the role of family and friends’ support during their unemployment.

4.4.1 “I depend on my grandmother’s pension”

The old age grants that are given to older people play an important role because it helps some of the participants to survive, particularly those from the Ohangwena region. Participants mentioned how it is divided among family members, although it is not sufficient to meet the needs of the youth, meaning they must still find something to earn and supplement the old age pension:

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“I Feel bad because the pension money for my grandmother which I depend on will not provide all my needs. I have to make sure that my basic needs are not wasted. I survive by sharing my grandmother’s pension, with which I buy food and some clothes. I have been helping older people from our village, by doing their laundry, washing their grandchildren, and they give me money to buy my basic needs whenever they have received their pension money” (Ohangwena Female aged 19 years old).

Very few participants from the Khomas region mentioned depending on their grandparents’ pension. This may be attributed to the many elderly people living in rural areas, as opposed to urban areas. Although participants find ways to provide for themselves, many of them rely on family and friends for their basic needs, such as food and clothing. Wearing clothes for three days or a week not to run out of what to wear, is also a way of saving one from buying new clothes, or washing detergents:

“It is my friends who help me with small job that I do a day. Other support is clothes, shoes, blankets, soaps, credit and newspapers in order to find some information about jobs okay. I survive in the way for borrow one of my friend to give old clothes and food that he is not anymore wish it or them” (Ohangwena, Male aged 29 years).

“In terms of food, my relatives assist me because I have two children and am not able to provide for all of them properly. I conserve all my daily basic needs because I do not have enough care from others everyday so every day I find something but I am afraid that one all the assistance might dry up for good. It is really difficult for me to survive I really struggle especially if nobody has bought the meat I have cooked for sale then sometimes I do not know where our meal for that day will come from. About clothing we just check at the clothes that are placed on the floor and we buy what we can afford” (Khomas, Female aged 21 years).

“I am staying with family members; they are taking care of most of my basics. I involve in youth club, when we make some fund in the community sometimes and it also helps with the things I need. For a thinker like me it’s easy to get clothing, because I know how to budget the little that I’m getting” (Ohangwena, Male aged 23 years).

“To one of my family he give me N\$200,00 to buy for food he is my brother from only my father and different mother” (Khomas, Male aged 21 years).

“My mother is the one who help me, she is cooking cakes that have business for cake, she can able to help me in term of buying food, clothes and all my needs she could able to do for me, the all my needs” (Khomas, female aged 22 years old).

Even when many of the youth are getting assistance from their relatives, many others are still surviving by doing things for themselves. They do it, for example, by selling anything they could on the streets, such as eggs and recharge vouchers; others chop wood for fire making, which they then sell to those who need firewood. Some ask those who are employed to give them some sort of jobs then they will pay them after completing the work like, for example, cleaning:

“I kept on selling cooked meat, sweets and anything that could give me income to help me for a time being. I used half a day today from eight in the morning up to one o’clock in the afternoon. I was selling cooked meat and trying where I could to find a job as well” (Ohangwena, female aged 27).

“No, today I did not go looking for a job. I went and sold my sweets and vetkoekies at school and along the road” (Khomas, female aged 32).

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For most of the unemployed youth, survival means living day by day, and this hustling for survival means engaging in various informal activities, such as selling *Kapana* (cooked food and {non-}alcoholic beverages, fruits, vegetables and miscellaneous items, such as recharge vouchers, glucose, clothes, cigarettes and sweets), often on the streets.

In summary, what is illustrated above is the high casualisation and informalisation of Namibia’s labour market. This has the potential to perpetuate exploitation and cheap labour, particularly because most of these young people have no form of protection, such as social security or being included in the trade union organisations. Moreover, what is demonstrated above, is the notion of ²“Utendela” - small informal tenders, which means doing ad hoc jobs. These are livelihood strategies used by unemployed youth in an attempt to make a living. This does not mean they have given up searching for formal employment but it is regarded as a temporary means which gives the unemployed youth an opportunity to survive. Most of the study participants indicated their preference for formal employment, particularly in government, as it offers better employment stability and social security benefits. This is not to say one should completely abandon informal employment and/or informal economy. In as much as informal employment has its challenges, it is also playing a vital role for many young Namibians in terms of providing opportunities for work experience and self-employment, as well as contributing to unemployed people’s livelihood and survival. Furthermore, a well-structured informal economy, in general, is essential with regard to increasing the opportunities for employment creation and the country’s economic growth. Namibia’s economy, as it stands, cannot depend solely on the formal economy, as it is unable to absorb all those entering the labour market.

The government has taken notable steps to address the needs of the poor; however, such programs require various changes to ensure their perpetual functioning. For instance, the poor require access to high-quality education in order to improve their chances of securing formal employment with a view to break the poverty cycle. It is government’s responsibility to devise such policies and plans which are people centred, and implement those programs with transparency.

Social protection systems in Namibia depend on employers’ and employees’ monthly contributions, and in the case of non-contribution, they are limited to Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs), pensioners and war veterans. As a result, the unemployed and, in particular, the youth are left out. According to the 2014 Namibia labour force survey report, the unemployment rate of youth aged 15-34 is almost 40% (NSA, 2015b). The absence of social welfare support and protection systems for the multitudes of unemployed youth has brought about social discontent and insecurity, especially in the last few years. Therefore social protection, which includes the unemployed, is more needed than ever, particularly for young people if they are to have dignity and security for their future. To provide a solid foundation of the “Namibia house for all” and embracing “inclusivity”, can only be accomplished if Namibia starts in-depth discussions on these issues of a comprehensive social protection system, which includes discussions of unemployment insurance for all.

5. Conclusion

Youth unemployment in Namibia is a major problem prevailing in both rural and urban areas in the country. This paper focused on how young and unemployed Namibians survive the problem of unemployment. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding on the prevalence of the problem from the view of those who are mostly experiencing unemployment. The study found that the employment opportunities available for many youth in Namibia

²Utendera means small tenders. A term used by research participants to refer to the many different ad hoc jobs sought in order to survive.

are low paying, with the informal arrangements surrounding the job engagements assuring little security of tenure in those positions. Youth are the most likely to fill low-quality jobs in the menial and informal sectors of the economy rather than jobs with decent wages and benefits. In addition, access to education remains the main challenge for unemployed youth striving to compete for limited employment opportunities in the labour market. The author therefore recommends an earnest discussion on the possibilities of providing unemployment benefits to those who are unemployed, if it is to yield president Geingob’s notion of “no one should be left out”. In the face of social inequalities, extreme poverty and unemployment, governments are laden with immense responsibilities of providing support to people and sustain their communities through effective policy making and the implementation of social support programs (Devereux, 2013). Furthermore, youth have needs and aspirations; they crave for good jobs as well as aspire to live a good life. However, a vast majority of young people in urban and rural areas of Namibia experience poverty due to a lack of employment opportunities. By responding to young people’s needs, social protection promotes social inclusion and cohesion. This also means a secure and stable *Namibian house for all*. As an onset to inclusivity, this study therefore propose BIG as one way of ensuring that no one is left out and also securing the dignity and socio-economic safety of the poor and unemployed, even as they persevere with their unemployment. Such an initiative can ameliorate the negative effects of unemployment, specifically among the youth. This however, should not be regarded as a replacement for the possibility of unemployment benefits for all.

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