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The Coronavirus and Social Justice in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 30 years, the successive SWAPO regimes that governed Namibia always followed a neoliberal policy path. Co-existing with the neoliberal elites are thousands of Namibians living in squalors in a country that has been declared as one of the most unequal nations on the face of the earth. Over the years, social justice activists never gave up the fight for a just and equitable society. They fought for better shelter, housing, economic equality, land, water and sanitation, free tertiary education and income grants to cushion the poor. The successive SWAPO regimes have been indifferent. Interestingly, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, government ended up implementing the very initiatives it rejected over the years. This text explores several social justice struggles over the years and demonstrates how these were implemented by government as a Covid-19 response in 2020. It thus argues that social justice is possible and the state has demonstrated its capacity in implementing these programmes. It then calls on social justice activists to use the Covid-19 currency to ensure that social justice becomes central in a post-Covid-19 economic order.

Introduction

The advent of the Coronavirus in Namibia witnessed renewed commitment from the government in the fight for social justice. This emerged owing to the battle against Covid-19 that requires access to basic services and needs such as housing, sanitation, potable water, food and other amenities – a status quo that has largely remained neglected and has widened inequality in Namibia. The attainment of Namibia's independence, on 21st March 1990, sparked hope for restructuring the social and economic divide brought by colonialism. As is the case in much of the colonised Africa, the colonial state was not interested in developing and extending economic benefits to the natives (Rodney 1972). As Jauch, Edwards, and Cupido (2009) submits, the German and South African colonial administrations are the root cause of social and economic disempowerment that widened the gap between the rich and the poor in post-independent Namibia. However, since the advent of independence, no significant strides have been achieved in narrowing this gap, as a vast majority of Namibians remain destitute. Literature buttresses this by explaining that poverty and inequality are still rife and characterise the Namibian society today (Lloyd 2020; New Era 2020). Various policy and legislative interventions have since been put in place to narrow the inequality ratios, but very little success has been recorded, owing to blatant implementation gaps (Sepúlveda 2012; New Era 2020). Since 1990, these policy and legislative interventions have been

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focused on poverty alleviation and human development (Republic of Namibia 2004, 2017). Yet, the rampant governance challenges confronting public administration have greatly undermined attempts at development activities and reducing inequality in Namibia (Ndhlovu and Remmert 2018). Indeed, Namibia's efforts at redressing colonial imbalances and inequality have not met the expectations of its people.

With only 10 years to go until the lapse of the long-term Vision 2030 development plan, the goals associated with propelling the country from a developing lower-middle income to developed higher income status beg careful evaluation considering the current exacerbated social and economic inequality in Namibia. Despite a steady economic growth, Namibia remains one of the most unequal countries in the world, thus signalling that economic benefits do not trickle-down to the poorest communities (Sepúlveda 2012; The World Bank 2017; Lloyd 2020; New Era 2020).

In addition to the above, the latest Human Development Report on Namibia indicates that the Human Development Index (HDI) in 2018 stood at 0.645, thus reflecting a medium human development – positioning the country at 130 out of 189 countries (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2019). The UNDP (2019) further adds that the period between 1990 and 2018 saw an HDI value increase by 11.3%. Indeed, a languid improvement over a 28-year period for a relatively small population. The Covid-19 pandemic interestingly exposed the limitations of class economic policies. The successes of the various Covid-19 preventative measures put in place by the Namibian government are dependent on the diverse socio-economic settings various communities find themselves in.

However, in a twist of events and renewed commitment to cater for the less privileged and economically vulnerable Namibians, the government put in place a safety net, an economic stimulus package (ESP) to cushion the social and economic consequences of Covid-19 (Shiimi 2020). The private sector and various state-owned enterprises have similarly been active in aiding government in this regard. To an unfamiliar observer, the spectacle of the sudden care of the poor and social interventions by the state and public sector might suggest that Namibia is a caring welfare state. When observed closely, particularly by analysing the history of social justice struggles in post-colonial Namibia, it becomes clear that this occurrence is new for successive South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) regimes that stood opposed and rejected efforts to introduce socio-economic policies to bring about social justice.

This paper analyses a situation in which the fight for social justice in Namibia was meaningfully advanced by Covid-19 in unprecedented ways. At the time the ESP was announced, Namibia only had 16 cases and no Covid-19 death. In sharp contrast, by July 2019, Namibia had 113 cases of the Hepatitis E virus, with 45 people having lost their lives (Jantze 2019). There was, however, no centralised meaningful response from the state as the case with Covid-19. By making use of a mixed research method that relies more on qualitative than quantitative secondary data, as well as a single case study exploration research design, the text explores the struggles for social justice in post-colonial Namibia and how the state rejected most of these interventions just for the same initiatives to surface as Covid-19 response. It then provides some thoughts on the future of social justice in Namibia, in the post-Covid-19 era. Essentially, the text is anti-neoliberal critique and aligns with studies that argue and submit that an interventionist state is possible.

From socialism to capitalism – SWAPO’s change in policy positions

Former liberation movement SWAPO, Namibia’s ruling party since independence, had aligned and identified with socialist countries before independence (Vigne 1987; Leys and Saul 1994). SWAPO’s operational sustenance and drive towards independence promised equitable access to resources for all Namibians (SWAPO 1981). This was opportune for SWAPO as the German and South African colonial and minority regimes deprived the majority of the population economic spoils and opportunities. In anticipation of this transformation and transition into independence, SWAPO committed to a socialist government in post-colonial Namibia. The then liberation movement confirmed that:

... at its Central Committee meeting in August 1976, SWAPO adopted a Political Programme which commits the party to a socialist transformation of Namibian society ... SWAPO is committed to uniting all Namibian people, particularly the working class, the peasantry and progressive intellectuals, into a vanguard party capable of safeguarding national independence and of building a classless, non-exploitative society based on the ideals and principles of scientific socialism. (SWAPO 1981, 285 and 294)

From the above, it is evident that SWAPO’s vision for an independent Namibia was rooted in the principles of socialism and proclaimed as early as 1976. The socialist orientation formed the edifice upon which SWAPO’s liberation of Namibia from colonial rule was based, the promise of having an ‘*equal non-exploitative*’ just society. This meant access to resources and services previously not accessible to particularly the black communities under colonial rule. Indeed, adopting socialism as a system of economic governance in an independent Namibia was seen as delivering real prospects of reversing the vast inequality gaps between the rich and the poor left by colonialism (Roemer 1994). SWAPO maintained socialist commitments in its 1989 election manifesto committing to bring about a just and equitable society (SWAPO 1989; Boer 2005). As Asante and Asombang (1989) had predicted in their 1989 analysis of the economic options before SWAPO, these socialist commitments did not result in anything worthwhile. Instead, pragmatism won the day. SWAPO won the 1989 elections and obtained a majority of the seats in the Constituent Assembly that shaped and drafted independent Namibia’s Constitution (Melber 2007). Resultantly, SWAPO could have had an overriding influence on the core sustenance and orientation of this Constitution, but abandoned its socialist orientation and allowed the Western Contact Group to take a leading role in shaping the constitution (Amupanda 2017). The limitations of a negotiated settlement, with regards to the environment in which the Namibian constitution is drafted, are often argued as the cause of SWAPO’s capitulation. But a look at the further 20 years after the limiting environment has long passed confirms that SWAPO abandoned the socialist path permanently, beyond the negotiated settlement limitations. There was always room to manoeuvre if SWAPO wanted to implement any socialist ideals. One of these opportunities is the principles of state policy in the Namibian constitution that states that principles of economic order shall follow what is called ‘*a mixed economy*’ – suggesting that both socialist and capitalist economic policies have a place in post-independent Namibia. Instead, post-colonial Namibia has largely followed a neoliberal capitalist path that renders the very notion of a ‘*mixed economy*’ suspect (LaRRI 2000).

This demonstrates that, upon attaining ruling party status after the 1989 elections, SWAPO abandoned the principles of socialism in order to attract foreign investors to

aid with the development of Namibia, and to garner the support of Western countries for Namibia's independence (Jauch, Edwards, and Cupido 2009; Schmidt 2009).

Not only has SWAPO changed its socialist stance to embrace the capitalist order, it resisted and rejected most advocates and advocacy for social justice. The result from this capitalist/neoliberal order, is that Namibia remained one of the most unequal countries in the world with the devastating impact on the poor as is characteristic of any capitalist society (Navarro 2007; Jauch, Edwards, and Cupido 2009; Schmidt 2009; World Bank 2019; Lloyd 2020). The section below explores the social justice struggles in post-colonial Namibia.

The struggles for social justice

With SWAPO no longer the champion of socio-economic agenda for the poor – an agenda that a socialist state would pursue – it meant that fight for social justice in Namibia would need new champions if SWAPO, as a liberation movement, could be considered as a former champion of this cause. The Namibian Constitution, adopted in 1990, assists the struggle for social justice to a minor extent – it entrenches right to free basic education and right to culture. The rest of socio-economic rights – such as housing/shelter, environment, minimum wage, health – are grouped in article 95, which cannot be enforced as the case with rights contained in the entrenched Bill of Rights (Republic of Namibia 1990; Hancox and Mukonda 2012). The fight for social justice in post-colonial Namibia thus took place outside the state. The labour movement that was closer to SWAPO in the struggle years was de-mobilised and co-opted in SWAPO machineries, participating in internal SWAPO politics and its leaders rewarded with government positions (Jauch 2014). Beyond SWAPO capitulation, the limitations of the neoliberal constitution and the demobilisation and co-option of labour, Hancox and Mukonda (2012, 160) summarises the challenges that faced the fight for social justice in Namibia arguing that:

... the problem lies with policy cohesion, lack of capacity, insufficient political will and ineffective implementation. In a country with a relatively small population of just over two million and sufficient natural resources, it should be possible to adequately meet the basic needs of a far greater proportion of the Namibian population.

Henning Melber, who served as Director of the Namibia Economic Policy Research Unit, details how civil society efforts and proposals for public work programmes, as an employment creation and poverty alleviation tool, were rejected by the political elite (Melber 2010). Despite the considerable challenging environment, the civil society organisations continued waging several campaigns on social justice and socio-economic rights (Lombardt and Nakuta 2014). Notable of these struggles include, amongst others, the Basic Income Grant (BIG), minimum and living wage, access to housing and sanitation. Some of these are discussed below.

The basic income grant

A 2003 review of Namibia's tax system, by government's own Namibia Tax Commission, found high rates of inequality and poverty and recommended a universal income grant as a remedial measure. The commission suggested an amount of N\$100 per month as a BIG for all Namibians up to the age of 60 (Jauch, Edwards, and Cupido 2009). Estimated as only

costing about 3% of the country's GDP, it was proposed that the BIG could be funded through adjustments to the national tax system. However, it emerged that no political consensus could be reached on the viability of the BIG; hence no real commitment came from the government in making it work for redressing the rampant inequality in Namibia. Jauch, Edwards, and Cupido (2009, 52) summarise the BIG divisions as follows:

... a coalition of churches, trade unions, NGOs and AIDS service organisations formed the Basic Income Grant Coalition with a view to advocate for the introduction of a BIG in Namibia. After 2 years of debating and lobbying, no breakthrough was achieved. Government ministers and parliamentarians were still divided over the merits of a BIG and the Coalition thus decided to implement a basic income grant in one particular village. This was meant to demonstrate the impact of a BIG in practice.

A pilot project of the BIG was carried out in January 2008, in Otjivero, a settlement that then had 1200 people characterised by high poverty rates. Everyone below the age of 60 received a BIG of N\$100 per month for 2 years. The position of the BIG Coalition was that if significant improvements were to be recorded in Otjivero, then BIG could work for the rest of Namibia in redressing inequality (Economic and Social Justice Trust 2019). Results from an impact assessment study found that malnutrition among children significantly reduced, income increased through self-employment activities and reduced school dropout with increased contributions to school development fund, amongst others (Basic Income Grant Coalition 2009). The Economic and Social Justice Trust (2019, 8) further explains the effects of the BIG in the Otjivero settlement as follows:

The introduction of the BIG dropped household poverty 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, only 16% fell below this poverty line. This shows the dramatic impact of a national BIG on food poverty levels in Namibia.

The above suggests that the BIG yielded encouraging results for redressing inequality for this community. Indeed, the prospects for restorative social justice for communities that were subjected to social and economic discrimination under colonialism were great. The results of the BIG in Otjivero provided a notable starting point that was expected to signal and encourage policy intervention and commitment from the government. Designed and modelled on the BIG, another attempt at providing income grants to vulnerable communities was made by civil society organisations during the 2012/2013 drought in Namibia. This intervention was aimed at cushioning the effects of the worst drought recorded in the history of Namibia and has recorded significant achievements. Haarmann and Haarmann (2015, iii) explain:

During the 2012/2013 summer months, ... modelled on the Basic Income Grant Pilot in Otjivero, the three Lutheran Churches in Namibia implemented a joint emergency cash grant programme. The cash grant was universally paid in four communities in four regions reaching 6,000 people ... the impact of the cash grant was very visible and provided a crucial lifeline for the communities. It has carried people through a very difficult period of time. Many people related that they would have died of hunger and despair without the grant.

Notwithstanding the numerous strides achieved with the BIG programmes, no real commitment has been shown by government through policy interventions (Economic and Social Justice Trust 2019). Instead, government officials such as the then Permanent

Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Dr. Kalumbi Shangula, who is now Health Minister, dismissed the BIG even after the positive results from the impact assessment study (Smit 2011a). Interestingly, Hage Geingob, as the then Trade Minister, projected himself as a supporter of the BIG, making personal financial donations to the BIG pilot project (Jauch and Tjirera 2017). In 2015, Geingob became Namibia's third president and appointed former chairperson of the BIG Coalition, Zephania Kameeta, as the Minister of the newly created Ministry of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare. Kameeta confidently assured the BIG Coalition that a BIG would be implemented within a time-frame of six months (Economic and Social Justice Trust 2019). However, this never materialised. On his part, Geingob made no mention of the BIG in his first State of the Nation Address in 2016 or in his economic blue print – the Harambee Prosperity Plan – that was launched in the same year (Jauch and Tjirera 2017). Instead, the expenditure of Geingob's administration significantly increased, but not on expenses aimed at widespread restorative social and economic justice. It is not an exaggeration for one to conclude that Geingob aligned and supported the BIG at the time for populist reasons. As soon as he was assured of his second term at the end of 2019, Geingob dropped Kameeta from his cabinet and dissolved the poverty eradication ministry (Nakatana 2020). A restorative social justice agenda seemed only a priority as part of a populist currency. Government's commitment to the poor has been at best limited and at worst hollow.

The living and minimum wage

Challenges associated with the living and minimum wage in Namibia emanate from the colonial era. As a result, the new independent government undertook to reform Namibia's labour relations system. The passing of the *Labour Act (Act No. 6 of 1992)* saw a bias for collective bargaining through tripartite consultations between government, trade unions and employers (private sector) to improve the living and working conditions, including pay (Jauch, Edwards, and Cupido 2009). The *Labour Act (Act No. 11 of 2007)* similarly failed to prescribe minimum wages, but nonetheless paved the way for assessments to be done to recommend minimum wages. Improving the working conditions for Namibians has been particularly important for the government, especially viewed against the historical colonial imbalances of income and as promised in SWAPO's 1989 election manifesto. Specific focus has been for those employees at the lower end of income distribution that minimum wage laws would benefit most. However, this expectation was not met as no significant improvements were recorded in living and minimum wages, hence negatively impacted on living and working conditions for the poor working class (Jauch 2007). Illustrating the inequality problem in Namibia since independence, a study depicting income distribution inequality indices on the national consumption share in 1993, Van Rooy et al. (2006, 14) found that:

... the bottom 20% (or quartile) of households receive only 1.85% of total expenditure per capita, whereas the top 20% is receiving 74.79% of total expenditure. Similarly, the poorest 20% of the population receives 2.45% of total expenditure, while the top 20% 70.95 percent.

In 2009, the same trend continued at a heightened downward spiral. In an interview with Jauch, Edwards, and Cupido (2009, 32), the United Nations Advisor and Development Consultant Robert Johnson indicates:

Countries (like Namibia) with higher GDP levels have greater public policy flexibility to engage in redistributive justice; if its Gini is also high (like Namibia) then its most likely that its people are not deriving a reasonable share of national wealth. The GDP value shows that the national capacity exists; the Gini value shows that public policy is either failing or willfully inequitable.

Indeed, the wide wage gap between the rich and poor since independence has been exacerbated by a lack of minimum wage proclamation by the Namibian government. However, a significant milestone in setting a minimum wage for Namibians was achieved in 2003, 2009, 2013 and 2015 for the agricultural sector. The legislative prescription of minimum wages marked the end of the labour exploitation as employers were now required to pay a minimum wage/salary. However, this was limited to the agricultural sector, albeit still an achievement. Agreeing with this, an International Labour Organisation representative, Hopolang Phororo, was reported saying Namibia demonstrated reasonable commitment towards compelling employers across all industries to pay a decent wage/pay/salary for work done (Masawi 2019). In 2017, an 11% minimum wage increment for domestic workers was gazetted by government which saw mandatory N \$1 502.05 per month, N\$346.89 per week, or N\$69.37 per day being paid. This was against a previous monthly rate was N\$1 353.20, N\$312.30 per week, N\$62.45 per day and a minimum of N\$7.80 per hour. The adjusted hourly wage is N\$ 8.67 and the minimum pay for part-time domestic workers who work five hours or less in a day (excluding Sundays and public holidays) is N\$43.35 (New Era 2018). Despite this increment, the new minimum wages still did not constitute a living wage that provides for decent standard of living. In 2018, another attempt was made at providing a living wage that saw the Wage Order for Domestic Workers increase the minimum wage by 1% (New Era 2018). While there are some sectoral interventions on minimum wage, Namibia remains without a universal minimum and living wage.

Free education

At independence, government committed to reform the education sector given that the apartheid educational designs remained. The intention has been to establish a unified education administrative structure that ensures equitable access to education for all Namibians (Amukugo 2017). It is for this reason that Article 20 (2) of the Namibian Constitution provides that primary education shall be free and compulsory at the cost of the state (Republic of Namibia 1990). In Section 38 (1), the *Education Act (Act No. 16 of 2001)* furthers and goes beyond this constitutional provision by including secondary education as follows:

All tuition for pre-primary, primary, secondary and special education in State schools, including - (a) all school books; (b) all educational materials; (c) all related teaching and learning materials; and (d) examination fees for full time learners, are provided free of charge to learners until they complete secondary education. (Republic of Namibia 2001, 25)

Despite these provisions of section 38 of the *Education Act (Act No. 16 of 2001)*, schools in Namibia have been subjecting parents to pay school fees. This changed when government scraped all school fees for primary education in 2013 and did the same for secondary education in 2016 (Nunuhe 2019) through the enactment of the *Education Amendment Act (Act No. 14 of 2017)*. Government has shown commitment to education

spending 20% of its budget on education and ranked as one of the top three countries in the world with a high GDP percentage catering for education (United States Agency for International Development 2006). The provisions of free education is limited to primary and secondary education. Government opposes the calls for free tertiary education arguing that it is costly to do so (Shikalepo 2019). This debate has prompted Kandjamba (2018) to conduct a study on the financing of higher education. He finds that free tertiary education is possible considering the relatively small numbers of enrolled students in institutions of higher education. Cost implications should thus not be used as an excuse against free tertiary education. Free tertiary education in the post-colonial period of any country is important for developing capacity for development. Hence, levying fees for tertiary education is seen as backward bending that thwarts efforts at development and self-reliance (Mamdani and Page 2009).

The fight for housing

The deliberate colonial discrimination on the provision of goods and services and general development between rural and urban areas created significant urban housing challenges in independent Namibia. In search of opportunities, many people flocked from rural to urban areas. This created a very high demand for urban housing (Schmidt 2009). This is the context in which the Namibian government identified housing a major priority requiring state intervention through its National Housing Policy launched soon after independence, in 1991. Concern has been for low to middle income groups that cannot qualify for land and credit facilities to acquire housing (Jauch, Edwards, and Cupido 2009; Schmidt 2009). Notwithstanding government's recognition of this housing problem, Namibia has 25 years after independence, been ranked as a country with the highest property inflation rates in the world (Shinovene 2015). Owing to urbanisation and population growth, the National Housing Policy of 1991 was not effective to cater for the increased demand for housing and was thus reviewed in 2009. At this point, the reviewed policy found that 70% of Namibians could not access urban land due to low incomes and poverty that excludes them from home loan facilities (Gabone 2017). In 2011, Smit (2011b) found that the:

... housing backlog is estimated to be over 80,000 houses. The majority of this housing backlog is in the country's lowest income segment, those earning less than N\$1 501 per month, where the backlog is 45,000 houses. This is closely followed by the category for those earning between N\$1 501 and N\$4600 a month, where the backlog is 30,000 houses.

The high housing backlog and the general lack of urban housing is a direct consequence of poverty and inequality (Lennon 2018). The 2009 National Housing Policy estimated that the housing demand will increase to 311,000 houses by 2030 (Republic of Namibia 2009). By 2017, however, the housing backlog had already surpassed the 300,000 by government's own assessments as part of the review of the NDP 4 (Republic of Namibia 2017). The problem has further been exacerbated by the high increase in housing prices that effectively excludes the poor and low-income groups. It has been noted that 90% of households in Namibia were earning less than N\$2 700 in 2016, hence excluded from the conventional home loan schemes for an average priced house (Lennon 2018). As a result, government announced, in August 2019, that nearly 1 million Namibians live in informal settlements – mainly without water, sanitation and electricity (Ashipala 2019). With the Namibian population at 2.5 million, this number means

close to half of the population resides in informal settlement. In an election year and in what was interpreted as an election gimmick, President Hage Geingob declared the situation in informal settlements as a *'humanitarian crisis'* (Ngutjinazo and Kahuirika 2019; Nakale 2019). Despite the theatrics, nothing at the level of substance and practice has been tabled to address the situation of the 40% of Namibians living in informal settlements (Ndhlovu and Remmert 2018).

Water and sanitation

The Water Supply and Sanitation Policy of 1993, reviewed in 2008, identifies the need for potable water and sanitation as a priority to redress the colonial imbalances that deprived a majority of those in rural areas access to potable water and sanitation (Italtrend 2009). Access to water supply and sanitation later became a major problem in urban areas where the proliferation of informal settlements increased beyond expectations due to high rates of urbanisation (Remmert 2016). While a majority of these people flocking to towns and cities in search of opportunities end up living in informal settlements, the rate at which local authorities provide water and sanitation in these areas is far below the demand. With only 10 years left to Namibia's long-term developmental vision, Vision 2030, that aims to achieve equitable access to potable water and freshwater resources by all, it is doubtful if these targets will be attained (Republic of Namibia 2004). Remmert (2016, 2) accounts for this development as follows:

Namibia's water and sanitation sector development since independence can be captured, broadly under three themes: - The establishment of increasingly complex and ambitious policies, laws, plans and regulations many of which remain fragmented, incomplete, unenforced and unimplemented; - The loss of technical expertise and capacity from public institutions to the private sector or retirement; and - The overall lack of public investment in tangible capital projects coupled with a growing maintenance backlog on the existing, increasingly inadequate infrastructure.

In 2016, only 17% of Namibians in rural areas had access to improved sanitation facilities while 47% use open defecation (Haidula 2016). In February 2019, it was reported that about 246 schools in Namibia do not have toilets for pupils. For those schools that have, the situation is not encouraging either – Shituwa Secondary School in Ohangwena region had only two toilets for 900 pupils (Haidula 2019; Haidula and Smith 2020).

Enters covid-19

Declaration of the State of Emergency and Announcement of a lockdown

The 2019 outbreak of Covid-19 in China subsequently saw the World Health Organisation (WHO) declare it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in 2020. The virus spread worldwide and by December 2020, more than 74 million cases have been confirmed worldwide with more than 1.6 million fatalities (World Health Organisation 2020). Namibia is one of the affected countries that reported its first two confirmed cases of the virus on 13th March 2020. By December 2020, the number of confirmed cases was more than 18 000 with more than 170 deaths (Shangula 2020a). Five days after the first confirmed cases, President Hage Geingob declared a State of Emergency (SOE) on 17th March 2020 in the country. 10 days later, this was followed by a lockdown

of two regions; Khomas Region (including the nearby towns of Rehoboth and Okahandja) and Erongo region for 21 days until 17th April 2020 (Shangula 2020b). The two regions, as ports of international entry, were seen as exposed to international travellers. The initial cases also came from these towns. As a result of the lockdown, travelling to and from these regions was therefore prohibited for the duration of lockdown. All workers, both public and private, were to remain at home. Parliamentary sessions were suspended. Markets and bars were prohibited (Shikongo 2020). Public gatherings and gatherings of more than 10 people were also prohibited. Few days before the lapse of the 21 days of the lockdown, on 14th April 2020, the lockdown was further extended until 5th May 2020, this time applicable to the entire country with the same conditions. Up until 4th May 2020, only critical and essential workers/services were permitted as per the lists published in the government gazette.

Following complaints and challenges faced by ordinary citizens, again informed by the realities of poverty and inequality, government was forced to relax the lockdown regulations and relax some provisions to allow for informal markets and trading to resume (Miyanicwe 2020; Ngutjinazo 2020; Menges 2020; Republic of Namibia 2020a). However, the exponential increase of Covid-19 infections and cases in the Erongo Region, particularly the town of Walvis Bay led President Geingob to revert it to stage 1 for the period 8–22 June 2020 and similarly extended this to entire region (Geingob 2020). At this point, the rest of Namibia was in stage 3 and transitioned into stage 4 on 29 June 2020 with the exception of the Erongo region that migrated to stage 3 for the period 22 June 2020–6 July 2020 (Geingob 2020). The State of Emergency and the lockdowns eventually ended in September 2020.

Economic stimulus package (ESP)

To mitigate the effects of Covid-19 on Namibia's economy, the government put in place a stimulus package. This ESP was launched on 1st April 2020 with the intention of keeping the economy afloat and cushioning the unprecedented hardships presented by the Covid-19 in general and the lockdown in particular (Shiimi 2020). In collaboration with stakeholders such as the private sector, development partners and other non-state actors, the first phase of the ESP was adopted with the intention of redressing the negative effects arising from the lockdown period (Ngatjiheue 2020; Shiimi 2020). Although the lockdown period was extended, the finance ministry did not make further budgetary allocation to the ESP to cater for the extension. In total, the ESP amounts to N\$ 8.1 billion earmarked for the following:

N\$5.9 billion as direct support to businesses, households and cash flow acceleration payments for services rendered to Government and N\$2.3 billion of additional support, guaranteed by Government, but off-balance sheet Government liabilities to further support loan uptake on preferential terms by business and individuals ... the Package is directed at: formal and informal businesses in sectors which are directly or indirectly affected by the lockdown measures and other external and internal demand and supply side shocks; and labour and households, both to ensure households and the related labour market aspects such as job retention and to mitigate the negative impact on income and to provide for the basic amenities for households such as potable water. This would promote health and hygiene as well as enable Namibians to cope with the constrained conditions arising from the lockdowns as we stave off the potential spread of the COVID-19. (Shiimi 2020, 2)

The ESP demonstrates a refreshing commitment of government aimed at assisting ordinary Namibians to mitigate the challenges associated with Covid-19. In the entire ESP, the Emergency Income Grant stands out for the purposes of this text.

Emergency Income Grant

As part of the ESP, provision was made for an Emergency Income Grant (EIG) to aid households who experienced reduced or no income, job losses, health expenses and other challenges due to the Covid-19. The EIG comprises a N\$750 once off payment available to those who are unemployed, between the age of 18 and 60 years and not receiving any other social grants (Deloitte 2020a). The Finance Ministry committed to make EIG payments no later than 7 days from the day of application. Processing of these payments are done in collaboration with the Social Security Commission (SSC) and other financial sector and information communication technology stakeholders through existing automated tele-machines of the banking institutions in Namibia (Ngatjiheue 2020). The N \$750 was based on the national poverty line that warrants a N\$250 per person per week. However, at the time of announcing the EIG, Namibia was under a 21 d lockdown, and government remained mum on whether an additional N\$500 would be made available for the 16 days lockdown extension. The EIG was allocated a total of N\$562 million in the ESP (Shiimi 2020). The first payments started after 14th April 2020 (Ngutjinazo 2020). By 16th April 2020, the Finance Ministry announced that an amount of N\$110 million has been dispatched to 146,974 applicants. By 22nd of April 2020, 5,79,000 applications were received of which only 2,34,300 applications were approved for a total amount of N\$176 million (Brandt 2020; Oliveira 2020). Unfortunately, it was also reported that 1,48,000 applicants were rejected (Brandt 2020; Oliveira 2020). On 6th May 2020, an additional 9,70,720 applications were received for the EIG by the close-off date of 30 April 2020, with 5,76,104 being approved to the tune of just over N\$432 million, with 3,94,616 rejected (Beukes 2020). This brings the total beneficiaries of the EIG to 9,57,378 Namibians. The applicants were required to use their cellphones to apply and submit their identity numbers. The EIG was marred by a lot of challenges, distrust, and unhappiness resulting in the Finance ministry resolving to decentralise applicant verifications to constituency councillors in the 14 regions (Brandt 2020; Oliveira 2020). These sentiments of ordinary Namibians as documented by Oliveira and Mbathera (2020), journalists of Namibia's largest newspaper, *The Namibian*, are telling and are reproduced for fitting comprehension.

Desiree Kahenge, a 31-year-old entrepreneur selling perishable goods at Tsumeb:

We fear that the income grant will not reach us ... we fear certain promises never reach the people they are supposed to benefit.

Talaohole Shilongo (36) a fruit vendor in Kuisebmond at Swakopmund:

I don't know what they will do with my ID number. Maybe they will say we voted for Itula and they will block everything I will do in future. Why can't we register through our association like we have always done with everything else?

Salomo Mwaimbange, a hairdresser from Swakopmund:

I applied but I did not get any response. I don't believe the system can handle all our applications. The time given is also too short.

These sentiments not only demonstrate the distrust ordinary citizens has on government, even during a life threatening scenario, it gives one an insight into how ordinary citizens have stopped viewing government as capable of being concerned about their welfare. The distrust and hopelessness can be understood when one has regard to the fact that it is the same SWAPO successive regimes that have rejected the BIG and other social justice initiatives for 30 years after independence.

Social Security Commission – Economic Stimulus Package

The Ministry of Finance in conjunction with the SSC, launched the SCC ESP that encompasses a National Employment and Salary Protection Scheme (NESPS) aimed at safeguarding jobs and employee incomes for hard hit industries (Kahiurika 2020). Valued at N\$320 million, the Commission explained that the:

The National Employment and Salary Protection Scheme for COVID19 is an employment scheme designed in terms of section 37 of the Social Security Act No 34 of 1994. The scheme aims to combine the efforts of the Government of the Republic of Namibia (through the Ministry of Finance and the Social Security Commission (SSC)) firstly, to dissuade employers from retrenching employees in the short term and secondly to provide support for individuals who have suffered a loss of income as a result of the COVID-19 shock. (Social Security Commission 2020, 1)

The NESPS intends to subsidise the wage bill for three sectors, namely construction, tourism and aviation that have been identified as severely affected, while other sectors will be catered for at a later stage (Deloitte 2020b; Kahiurika 2020). Employers that benefit from NESPS will be waived from SSC contributions and receive a cash subsidy amounting to 17% of total wage bill for a period of 3 months (April, May June 2020) from the state. Employers are asked to refrain from retrenching employees during the same period, while salaries should not be reduced by more than 50% (Deloitte 2020b; Kahiurika 2020). Furthermore, this scheme is limited to employees who earn no more than N\$50,000 per annum, amounting to about N\$4,166 or less per month. The expectation is that this will effectively cater for 12,000 low-income earners amounting to N\$320 million. The wage subsidy to employees is limited to 50% of an employee's monthly salary, and subject to a minimum of N\$1000 per month for 3 months. Small Medium Enterprises, their employees and domestic workers in the informal sector are to receive N\$1000 per month for 3 months, while those registered with the Man on the Side of the Road organisation, or other similar informal traders, are to receive a once off N\$3000 grant amounting to N\$9 million (Deloitte 2020b). The focus of NESPS is on protecting the poor low-income earners. What is of particular interest is that income and job losses are not a new phenomenon in Namibia. For instance, the current economic struggles saw over 60,000 jobs lost during over the 2016/17 years (Iikela 2018; Erastus 2019). While these figures were expected to be higher before the Covid-19 owing to the protracted economic recovery, these figures are surely higher now during the lockdown. Before the Covid-19 and subsequent lockdown, no real commitment has been demonstrated by government to safeguard the poorest against the effects of poor economic performance as seen now during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Access to water

The prevention of Covid-19 is reliant on practicing hygiene, which requires water. The ESP made provision for subsidising water supply during the lockdown period. The declaration of the SOE by the president saw the Minister of Urban and Rural Development give a directive to all local authorities for the reconnection of water to households that were closed due to non-payment (Republic of Namibia 2020b). Furthermore, all communal and water sources in urban informal settlements were now accessible without key cards or tokens. This water supply intervention is expected to cost government about N\$10 million (Shiimi 2020). As a necessary intervention, the poorest people in the communal areas and informal settlements were the biggest beneficiaries as access to potable water has been a serious challenge since independence. Recordings, widely seen and distributed on social media, of an elderly man from the improvised Otjomuise informal settlement of Windhoek shouting ‘free water, free food, viva Hage Geingob’ demonstrated how much this means to ordinary Namibians who waited for 30 years for such kindness. Local authorities took further initiative as seen with the Windhoek Municipality that allocated N\$8.9 million towards mitigating the risks posed by Covid-19 on service delivery. The City also donated N\$ 3,00,000 from the Mayoral Relief Fund to the central Covid-19 response efforts. By 31 March 2020, the City of Windhoek was reported to have reconnected water to 1200 households which were closed due to nonpayment, with more expected to be reconnected by then (Nel 2020). Furthermore, Nel (2020) reports that 18 water tanks had been put up in informal settlements in Windhoek to provide free water to community members there. A two days refill schedule of these tanks has been put in place. The SSC donated N\$3.3 million meant to erect water tanks in several constituencies in Windhoek, primarily those of low and ultra-low income communities. A further N\$5,00,000 has been donated to the Erongo region for the same cause. Namibia’s telecommunications giant, and state owned enterprise, Mobile Telecommunications (MTC) joined the bandwagon of donations and availed N\$1,00,000 for water provision (Nel 2020), while Namibia’s power utility company, NamPower, donated 90 water tanks to informal settlements (Rasmeni 2020). All of a sudden, water agony for most Namibian was no longer a problem, albeit temporarily.

Provision of toilets, housing and food initiatives

Several public and private entities entered the philanthropic bandwagon of donating and aiding the poor. NamPower donated 150 toilets and sanitisers to informal settlements in Windhoek, Okahandja and Erongo Region (Rasmeni 2020). It’s Managing Director, Kahenge Haulofu, cognisant of the existence of the vulnerable and poor in Namibia, sympathised:

Although everybody is affected in one way or another, those who might feel the hardest pinch are the most vulnerable and poor among the communities who do not have the necessary means or access to essential basics prevent and fight the pandemic. (Rasmeni 2020)

His counterpart, the Chief Executive of SSC, Milka Mungunda, shouldered SSC responsibility arguing that it is the responsibility of all to assist the poor particularly those in deplorable informal settlements (Nel 2020). She was expressing these sentiments during a

donation handover of N\$3.3 million mentioned earlier, meant for the provision of toilets across several constituencies in Windhoek. Because of the housing situation in Namibia, the implementation of SOE and lockdown regulations was always going to be a challenge. In the capital city, Windhoek, Namibia's telecommunication giant, MTC moved quickly to shelter the homeless, donating blankets, mattresses, and 120 tents meant to accommodate 240 homeless people at Katutura Youth Complex Stadium and Khomasdal football stadium. These donations allowed the homeless to remain confined to these tents thereby adhering to the lockdown regulations. MTC made further provision for food supply to these homeless people for the duration of the lockdown period (Bayer and Newaka 2020; Namibian Sun 2020).

MTC further pledged N\$1 million to provide impoverished communities with soap, sanitisers and food parcels during the lockdown period. Namib Mills, the largest grain processing company in Namibia, donated 2.9 and 1.3 tons of maize meal and pasta to the value of N\$75,000 to ensure food supply and boost the immune of affected communities (Namibian Broadcasting Corporation 2020).

NSFAF Laptops for students

The Covid-19 pandemic in Namibia resulted in institutions of higher learning suspending face-to-face contact sessions at their own volition, earlier on, as required by Lockdown regulations. As a result, various institutions have transitioned to online teaching and learning. In this context, digital platforms of learning have become essential in facilitating teaching and during the Covid-19 lockdown period. For students, access to computers is thus vital for accessing online learning platforms to ensure uninterrupted learning (Nakale 2020). However, this has brought with it several challenges as not all students have access to laptops and computers, thus hampering their access to e-learning material. As a Covid-19 response intervention, the Namibia Students Financial Assistance Fund (NSFAF) announced that it would release a total of N\$282 million to students, capped at N\$10,000 per student, for students to acquire laptops and other tools required for e-learning (Kandovazu 2020).

Conclusion – it is possible: thanks to covid-19

One of the arguments that are always made by government officials in rejection of proposals of expanded social welfare programmes is that they are expensive. The state, in its neoliberal pursuit, constantly argue that the economy will be built by the private sector and its core task is limited provide an enabling environment (Amupanda 2017). It has been argued herein and elsewhere that this path, for 30 years, has not yielded notable fruits – Namibia remains one of the most unequal nations on the face of the earth.

With few cases and zero death at the time, compared to Hepatitis E virus that is still active today, Covid-19 brought to the fore what the state has always denied and not allowed – its interventionist character. Seemingly concerned about the state's Covid-19 overdrive, the former Health Minister and the former Covid-19 response team focal person, Dr. Bernard Haufiku, bemoaned the fact that the state seems to only concentrate on Covid-19 forgetting about Hepatitis E (Ikela 2020). It became evident that the state can, indeed, intervene to assist the poor in meaningful ways.

Despite more than 15 years of rejection of the introduction of the BIG, the state abandoned implementing an income grant. To be simplistic and if semantics mattered, the only difference between the BIG and the EIG are the words 'basic' and 'emergency'. The rationale and method – to aid the poor and destitute through cash provisions – is exactly the same. Social justice activists had always argued then, as they do now, that the condition of the poor living in impoverished communities has always been an emergency. If an emergent situation justifies an income grant then they require such grant with or without Covid-19. As stated earlier, President Hage Geingob declared the situation in informal settlements, where nearly 1 million Namibians reside, as a humanitarian crisis in 2019. It is those in humanitarian crises that need assistance – with or without Covid-19. The BIG was proposing a grant of only N\$100.00 per month while the EIG provided N\$750 once off which translates close to N\$600 million. Assuming that a revised BIG lists 5,00,000 beneficiaries, an amount paid as once off EIG can provide these beneficiaries with a N\$100 BIG for the duration of one year. Covid-19 has not only proven that state can intervene on the side of the poor, it has also proven that the state can implement a BIG.

While the fight for better protection of labour in general and for universal minimum and living wage in particular has not enjoyed support of the state over the past 30 years, the initiatives by the state, including the N\$320 million National Employment and Salary Protection Scheme by the SSC have demonstrated that a dialogue for better working conditions, bordered on state interventionism beyond existing parameters, is possible for the better protection of the workers. Covid-19 response provides a fertile ground for mobilisation for the fight for universal living and minimum wage in a post-Covid-19 era. Government officials had always argued that it is not possible to provide free tertiary education. The provision of N\$282 million in non-tuition support to tertiary education students to buy learning equipment provides renewed impetus to the fight for free tertiary education. The N\$10 million subsidy to local authorities to reconnect households whose water was disconnected is not only a welcome relief to the poor but a sad display that the state is aware that thousands of Namibians are without water due to non-payment. A basic need such as water should not be one that is made available to the poor only on account of a pandemic. That several public entities with muscular financial power, such as MTC, SSC and NamPower amongst others, moved quickly – with their executives making compassionate speeches – to shelter the homeless, providing them with food and assisting government and local authorities with the provision of water and sanitation makes one wonder – what if this is not a once-off intervention and is made a permanent component of their social responsibility? Wouldn't this go a long way in responding to the 30 years cry for adequate shelter, water and sanitation amongst others? Indeed, Covid-19 has demonstrated that social justice cause in Namibia is noble and the state is capable of responding and intervening to thwart inequality and save the poor who are sinking in the neoliberal economic quagmire.

It took Covid-19 for state officials to come to their senses and implicitly accept most arguments of and by social justice activists over the years. It is not only the acceptance of the proposals but also the actual implementation of the same. It can now be argued, that two income grants have been implemented in post-colonial Namibia; the BIG in 2009 and the EIG in 2020. Reference will be made, for mobilisation purposes, that the state and public entities demonstrated that the poor, homeless and the economically destitute and dejected masses can be assisted in meeting their basic needs such as

shelter, water and sanitation. Indeed, the state has demonstrated that workers and students can be assisted with expanded job security initiatives and in acquiring learning material. Understandably, the state will not accord the Covid-19 state interventionist order with permanent status. It is, therefore, incumbent upon social justice activists to use this opportunity to reorganise and remobilise using the Covid-19 currency to ensure that social justice become central in government's post-Covid-19 economic policy and orientation.

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