

BIG, Social Justice And Solidarity

• HENNING MELBER



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THE debate around a Basic Income Grant (BIG) stands for a significant discourse. Critics tend to sweep essential parts of this discourse under the carpet. They tend to downplay if not ignore the fundamental value debate it touches upon. Their seemingly rational objections are, however, guided by an own belief system in fundamental values, which suggest a rationality of a deeply disturbing nature and orientation.

This intervention seeks to point to the principles a BIG resonates with and the flaws the critical comments questioning the legitimacy of a BIG display. They avoid – deliberately or unintentionally – to deal with the real challenges social welfare initiatives of such calibre present to the dominant thinking. A thinking, which privileges the so-called haves, who benefit from the socio-economic disparities of societies characterised by high degrees of material inequality in the distribution of national wealth.

Preceding the BIG initiative, a rather intensive debate on public work programmes as a potential tool to alleviate unemployment and poverty took place in

Namibia, although to a large extent outside of the public limelight. It displayed a similarly disturbing bias as can be witnessed now. Advocates of labour-based work initiatives as a means to provide the marginalised with some minimum monetary income for spending on their individual priorities were in vain arguing in favour of such empowering cash payments. Instead the patronising, benevolent “food for work” attitudes guiding such public employment projects in return for hard physical labour continued to maintain that these people were not able to use cash payments in a responsible manner.

The empirical evidence gathered during these debates fell on deaf ears. But it showed that the cash payments made in pilot projects were used to a large extent on basic needs and investments into a future (for example by purchase of small livestock, of school uniforms, payment of school fees and related expenses). In similar fashion as the arguments dismissed then, the BIG initiative is nowadays met with an almost knee-jerk response ridiculing such proposals for financial transfers as naïve justifications for free rides of those, who do not really want to earn a decent living.

As if in Namibia one could easily earn such a decent living in midst of abject poverty and the highest income discrepancies measured among societies in the world. Such dismissive attitude places the respon-

sibility for the misery upon those who are experiencing marginalisation. As if their situation is self-inflicted and it would be merely a matter of a free will and determined mind to emancipate oneself from destitution. With an unemployment rate of above 50 per cent this borders to a scandalous cynicism and arrogance of those, who are not at the receiving end of inequality and do not have to experience what it means to be disempowered through exclusion.

Seemingly pragmatic concerns objecting to the BIG initiative are fiddling with figures and thereby create a smokescreen, which misleads what a BIG debate is really about: If and how social justice and solidarity should be guiding principles for a caring society, in which the better off share a responsibility to ensure that minimum standards of living are provided to all members of society to give them the opportunities they are denied. This is anything but a new debate.

It is rooted in a long history of social philosophy and the notions of welfare. They go back at least over 200 years and can be traced in the arguments presented by Thomas Paine in his “Agrarian Justice” of 1797. He suggests the creation of a national fund to provide every citizen above the age of 21 with an annual financial amount independent of their other income and property. His proposal was not guided by humanitarian concerns, but by a deep sense of justice.

Paine based his proposal by no means on an argument for benevolence. His point of departure was the existence of enormous social disparities among citizens in a given society. “Poverty”, as Paine diagnosed, “is a thing created by that which is called civilised life”. As a result, so-called civilisation, “make one part of the society more affluent, and the other more wretched, than would have been the lot in a natural state”. He therefore concluded: “It is not charity but a right, not bounty but justice, that I am pleading for.”

Solidarity is a complementing notion to social justice. If solidarity is taken as a living moral, ethical and political obligation, which entails empathy as much as the loyalty to fundamental

human values of equality and dignity to which all human beings are entitled to in an undivided manner, acts of solidarity are not confined to a particular era or stage of historical processes. They are an ongoing commitment and engagement. Solidarity starts at home, but does not end there.

Pointers to similar initiatives propagating BIG elsewhere, thereby suggesting that the Namibian debate is somewhat the result of a conspiracy and imposed from the outside, are not only bordering to paranoia. They also create another smokescreen in the sense that it is suggested that it might be something dubious that people elsewhere think alike. As if the anti-Apartheid struggle was morally questionable because it was supported and led by many around the world, who were sharing the conviction that people everywhere are entitled to fundamental human rights. After all, the slogan “an injury to one is an injury to all” means also that there should be no borders when it comes to social and political struggles for emancipation and justice.

Solidarity as well as demands for more social justice are also anything but isolated notions of utopian

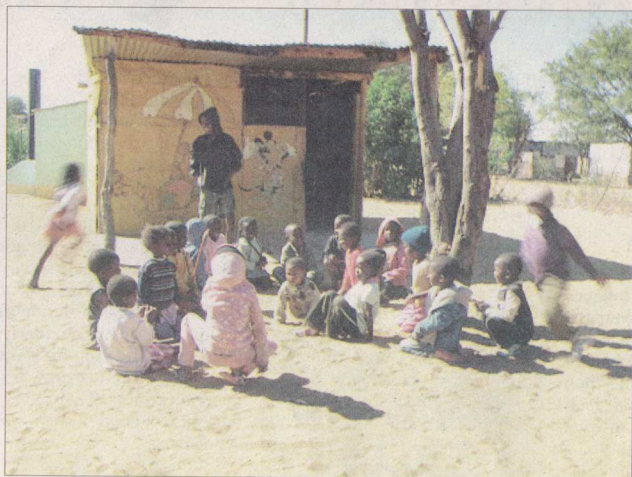


Photo: Dirk Haarmann

IMPROVED ATTENDANCE...This creche recorded an increased enrolment from 13 to 52 within the first few months after the introduction of the BIG pilot project.

socialist dreams. Such humanist concerns are rooted in very different convictions and beliefs. A recent illustration is the Encyclical Letter ‘Caritas in Veritate’ by the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI of 2009. It opens chapter four dealing with the development of people, rights and duties, and the environment with a quote from an Encyclical Letter of his predecessor Paul VI alerting to “the reality of human solidar-

ity” as “a benefit for us” (clause 43).

One does not have to subscribe to the Catholic faith and the consequences the Supreme Pontiff draws from his understanding of solidarity as a human value (and indeed some among us might be adamant that his postulates, although seemingly based on a common point of departure, are counter to true human emancipation, justice and solidarity). The point is that

there is a wide scope for alliances in search for another development, which seeks to promote a more caring society embracing also the weakest.

It is therefore utterly disturbing if a political leader and head of state, who is known for his deeply Christian faith, dismisses BIG as a form of exploitation of those who are able and privileged to earn their living through work, which provides them and their

families with a salaried income. As if sharing is not among the fundamental principles of a Christian humanity and an ingredient to a caring society.

Instead, greed seems to be more acceptable than concerns for the well being of others as a means of well being for all. The political leaders of Namibian society reportedly celebrated the 20th Independence anniversary by toasting with French champagne at N\$1 000 a bottle. The Cabinet members get new top-class limousines since the old ones have become too small for their well-fed bodies. These are obscenities in a country, where half the population able and willing to work is denied to earn a living due to unemployment.

Poor people in Namibia have no choices. Those in control over the wealth created have. BIG might not be the best answer to solve the challenges of structurally rooted inequality and destitution. But at least it tries to come up with some kind of initiative to contribute to a society, in which all members obtain the minimum standard of living they deserve. It is an effort to create an environment, which seeks to enable the excluded to master their living conditions in a more empowering way with some degree of dignity.

BIG deserves better than to be dismissed by those, who seem to care more about securing and advancing further their own privileges than showing empathy with the plight of the ordinary people. Our hard fought for liberation from a minority rule based on privileges for a few at the expense of the majority should mean more than just a further promotion of Social Darwinism.

As a result of such mindset, which propagates the survival of the fittest, the species of fat cats prospers and advances. In contrast, the people battling to survive in their anything but self-inflicted misery are once again losing out. It is a disgrace that despite the long way we came to fight against injustices we have not yet reached the degree of social awareness and responsibility as expressed by Thomas Paine more than two centuries ago.

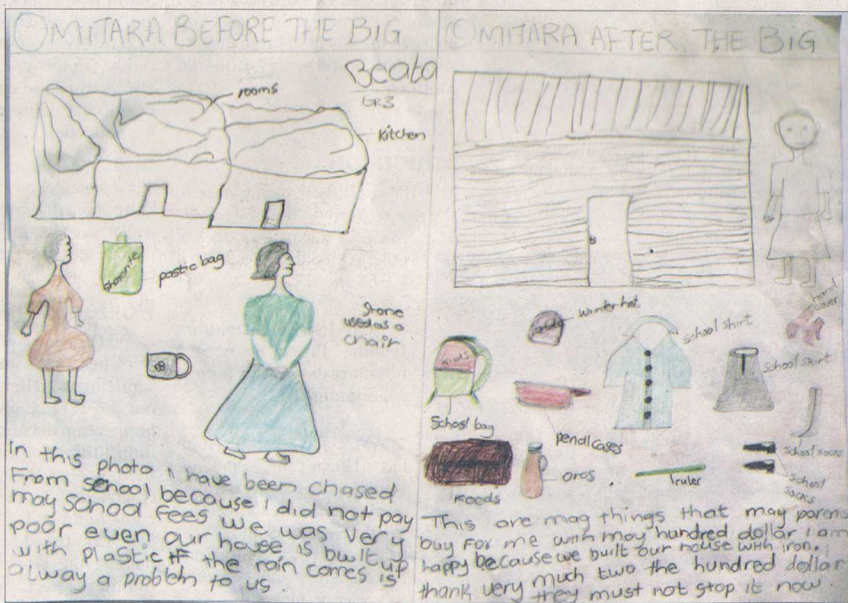


Photo: BIG

BEFORE AND AFTER...The drawing was done by Otjivero Primary School Grade 3 pupil Beata Shimuandi. The pupils had the task to draw their experience of life before and with the Basic Income Grant.

we've got you covered

Nkurenkuru

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