

A day in the life of Otjivero BIG recipients

• **MAGRETH NUNUHE and SELMA SHIPANGA at OTJIVERO**

SWEET little faces sit under a tree scraping for the last porridge bits in a pot while adults watch with hollow despair as they tend to many hungry stomachs with very little or nothing to provide.

Here and there you hear indistinct noises of men and women who have already gathered at a shebeen on an early Friday morning. Dust and shacks in disrepair are the order of the day in this sleepy settlement of Otjivero at Omitara.

At the far end of the village is a clinic, but there are no patients yet – a rare sight at any health facility. Could it be that everybody is healthy this morning? “No,” laughs Christiaan Molelekeng, who works at the clinic and is also a community counsellor for HIV-AIDS. He says the clinic receives about

25 to 30 patients per day for minor illnesses while chronic ones are sent to Gobabis. Maybe the patients are still going to arrive, although it's already 10h30.

Ditching deeper into the village, we meet Frieda Nembwaa, who runs a bakery business. She excuses herself to take a call. Orders are pouring in for the delicate bread she bakes, “It will be ready by one o'clock,” she promises the customer. She bakes about three hundred small loafs of bread per day for N\$1 each.

Frieda came to settle at Otjivero so that some of her older kids could go to school. She and her

husband, who works at one of the nearby farms, have seven children altogether. “This little business is the result of BIG,” she says, as she points at her shack painted in bold letters ‘Life After Straggle’ (Struggle). She is referring to the Basic Income Grant or BIG as it is known – the pilot project that offers a monthly cash grant of N\$100, now reduced to N\$80, for 900 inhabitants of Otjivero since 2007.

“BIG is really helping,” she says, almost pleading. “The president is saying we will become lazy, but that's not true. It's not that we don't want to work. It's just that we are trying to make ends meet with the little that we have.” Frieda says that she can now afford to pay school fees.

She directs us to the Otjivero Primary School to see for ourselves how BIG has brought change to the little village behind the highway to Gobabis. “Before BIG came along, children used to skip school a lot because they had to go ask their parents money for food. Now, most of the children even have school uniform,” says the principal Rebecca Heita.

She says the children are cleaner now. “You can see the difference,” she reiterates Frieda's words. “BIG can't buy a lot of food, but that bag of maize meal and coffee makes a difference,” she adds. The principal pulls out the different registers

of annual enrolment and shows us that when BIG was implemented in 2007 there were 239 children at the school, which takes up pupils from Grade 1 to 7. Last year that figure increased to 283 and this year to 331. “People outside might not see the difference, but we see the difference,” she adds.

But it's not until we enter the homestead of the Smith family that we are confronted with the stark reality of poverty. Johannes Smith and his wife Christina, with their



READY TO LEARN ... Angelika Gainus and Johannes Seibeb are Grade 3 pupils at Otjivero Primary School at Omitara. According to the principal, enrolment has increased and more children are wearing uniforms now.

12 children between the ages of 4 to 18, live in a small corrugated-iron

shack. They were apparently dumped by their former farm employers at Otjivero in 2007 with only a bag of maize meal, sugar, soap and a bag of tobacco. “It was God's mercy that BIG came along,” says a shaken Christina. “My husband couldn't go look for other work because the farmers here had already instigated each other against him,” she adds.

“We live on that mercy (BIG),” says the husband ruefully as he lights a cigarette. He says that he was born on the farm Orumbo and so were most of his children. His father and grandfather also worked there and were buried at that farm. According to Johannes, the problem started when his nephew came to visit and was beaten up by the farm owners. After that the farm owners apparently promised to pay them if they signed some documents, but once they did that they were taken out of the farm with all their belongings.

Now they get N\$700 per month from the BIG project which they use to buy food, pay school fees and pay debts. They also

fish in the Otjivero dam for fish to add to their food surplus.

Despite the government's reluctance to implement income grant, the BIG Coalition – which has been campaigning for the countrywide application of the grant – decided to continue with the project, even when the last payment was scheduled for last December.

“We didn't want them to slide back into poverty,” said Uhuru Dempers, Nangof Director, who was also visiting the small village. He said that they were looking at opportunities how the people of Otjivero could sustain themselves. One of the ideas is to establish a fish farm, where residents can get permits to fish in the Otjivero river.

“We made a proposal to the Namtax Consortium in 2002, but government was just quiet,” he added.

He said that there were many debates about the BIG project and that the government's argument was that they couldn't dish free money to people that are doing nothing. “N\$100 is just to keep

people alive,” emphasised Dempers, saying that they have a bond with the community of Otjivero and can't just abandon them like that. He said they had enough resources to provide the grant to the people of Otjivero until 2011.

Dempers disclosed that they were planning grassroots campaigns in all regions, saying that the model was not for the rich but for the poor. “Why should we punish kids because their parents are poor?” he asked.

**The BIG Coalition – consisting of the Council of Churches in Namibia, the National Union of Namibian Workers, the Church Alliance for Orphans, the National Youth Council, the Namibia NGO Forum Trust and Nanaso – had carried out the two-year project with the hope of getting Government to implement the grant nationwide, as an answer to Namibia's poverty situation.*

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BIG MADE IT POSSIBLE ... Frieda Nembwaa runs a bakery at Otjivero. She says her business is a result of the BIG monthly grant.