

THE NAMIBIAN

NATIONAL NEWS

BIG is no joke, says BIG

• NANGULA SHEJAVALI

THE Basic Income Grant (BIG) Coalition yesterday reacted strongly to Prime Minister Nahas Angula's comments that the BIG is not the solution to Namibia's poverty problem.

At the same it called for "constructive and honest debate about the BIG concept".

Responding to youth leaders who visited his office on Monday and called on Government to implement the BIG, the Prime Minister said such a grant was "not a normal way of assisting people", arguing instead for a targeted approach in addressing poverty.

He also said that a basic income grant would be "making a joke out of the poor by saying that everybody – including myself as Prime Minister – should get N\$100", saying that this would discriminate against the poorest of the poor.

In response to these comments, the BIG Coalition yesterday said the BIG had proven to be

more effective than some of the poverty alleviation programmes in place.

"Has it hence become a normality that Namibia is still the most unequal society in the world? Is it normal that 30 per cent of children below the age of five years have clear signs of malnutrition? Is it normal that 36,7 per cent are unemployed with very little prospect to ever enter productive economic activity?" it asked.

Highlighting some of the findings of a pilot project that the coalition has been conducting at Otjivero-Omitara since November 2007, the Coalition also questioned: "Is it a joke and not normal, when children are no longer malnourished? Is it a joke, when people can pay the N\$4 to go in time to the government clinic and receive treatment? Is it a joke, when parents can pay for their children's school fees and children attend classes up until the end of the day and pass their exams?"

While acknowledging the

widespread poverty in Namibia, the Prime Minister said on Monday that targeted assistance through Government's social grants such as disability grants, veterans' grants and social pensions was a better way to go.

He also suggested that one could even consider unemployment insurance as a means to addressing poverty.

For the 2009–2010 financial year, Government has budgeted more than N\$850 million for social pensions through the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, over N\$193 million for maintenance grants and foster-parent allowances through the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, and about N\$220 million for veterans through the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs.

These social grants total more than N\$1,26 billion.

But the BIG Coalition argues that even with the necessary social investment by Government, poverty and inequality in Namibia remain abnormally high, indicating that a large number of people

are falling through the cracks of Government's social safety net.

Arguing for a universal grant, the Coalition stated that those over the age of 60 would not be eligible for the envisaged grant, as under current laws these people would be eligible for old-age pensions.

It also noted that under the BIG scheme, an affluent person under the age of 60, while receiving the basic income grant, would in fact fork out a few hundred more in additional tax.

The coalition said this meant that "in real terms he or she would not receive extra money but would in contribute considerably more than the N\$100 he or she receives".

Further, while it might seem unappealing, the universal approach, as opposed to a targeted one, was necessary for a just redistributive scheme.

The Coalition noted that conditional models have been proven to be discriminatory, arbitrary and administratively expensive.

nangula@namibian.com.na