



**EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN THE REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA**  
**EVANGELIES LUTHERSE KERK IN DIE REPUBLIEK VAN NAMIBIË**

!Gâi=hôa Kerkib Lutheri dîb Namibiab Ina - Ongerki jEvangeli ja Luther mu Namibia

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## **A Basic Income Grant in Namibia**

### **A response by the needy**

#### **Presentation by**

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### **Introduction**

When we in Namibia planned the trip to this important conference, I thought I would deliver an academic paper on the churches involvement in the debate for a Basic Income Grant and brief you on what we have achieved in the last years in Namibia and what challenges remain. However, a newspaper report last week changed my mind. The article in the newspaper reported about the events around the ‘International Poverty Eradication Day’. In Namibia, the day was marked by a Special Prayer meeting for the Basic Income Grant on the steps of the Parliament building. Furthermore, the ‘Global Call for Action against Poverty’ appointed two Namibian ambassadors for this campaign and I was chosen as one of them. During the following weekend’s ‘stand up for poverty campaign’, I delivered a speech saying that our wonderful speeches and words have so far not changed the life of the ordinary people living in poverty. It seems the journalist attending the event, took me by my word and interviewed one of the participants of the event. The journalist titled her article: “What if you were in her shoes”? The article then takes us through the life story of an HIV positive woman with two children. The father of her first born died

and the second one left her alone, she is unemployed and has no income at all. Her attempt to access the government grants, her children are eligible for, failed since she cannot get the death certificate of the father. She only gets food for her and her children by begging, but she says ‘People in my area are tired of me...’. While she has access to ARVs, she says she rarely takes them, because: ‘When I take the pills, I vomit because there is no food in my stomach.’ What would you do if you were in her shoes?

### **Income security: A right not a privilege**

After I read the article, it was clear that for us it does not help to produce beautiful papers. If the millions of papers and documents on which the redemption and renewal of humanity is written, were bread and medicine, hunger and diseases would have been eradicated long ago from the face of the earth. The calling and the mission of the church is to be with those who are suffering, but mission is not so much something we SAY, but something we actually DO. In the face of such life story which is not only suffered by many in Namibia, but all over the world, it is imperative to ask: ‘What can we do without making only empty promises or postponing the help to the time some policies are in place or bear fruits?’ Too often, the people who should have benefited from that have then already died because of preventable diseases? The basis of the churches’ actions is the bible and the church is called to follow Jesus’ example. Jesus had a clear option for the poor and hence we are to step into his footprints and serve those who are suffering. People living in poverty are suffering everyday. The questions remains: ‘What are we doing about this suffering?’ The church has tried and still tries to feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty, and while many say, it is only a drop in the ocean to help individuals like this, I believe, in the face of such suffering, we are obliged to help where we can.

However, we cannot only play the ambulance. We need to know what causes the accidents and face the challenge to

remove it! At the last General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, a Professor from Brazil said: ‘I do not think that the eradication of poverty is the biggest problem we are facing, the biggest problem in our world today is the unlimited accumulation of wealth and the challenge is to redistribute this wealth. If we are able to do that, then poverty will be eradicated.’ Of course, the participants were shocked, but I believe, the Professor got the right point. Poverty is not a fate, but created by and rooted in injustice. We therefore have to speak out for justice.

Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador once said: “When I give bread to the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask, why are they poor, they call me a communist”. In Southern Africa, we again have to enter this stage of asking this difficult and challenging questions - to us here today and to society at large, including our own politicians. We know very well that this is very risky and often not easy. In fact, Archbishop Romero was assassinated in El Salvador in 1980 just for asking questions like these and action on it. We are fortunate to be in a free Namibia and a democratic South Africa at last, with the governments on our sides, but be prepared: It still is a bumpy road.

Without a change and transformation in the way we are dealing with wealth, poverty will not be eradicated. Poverty is a violation of basic human rights and destroys human dignity. People have a right to a decent human life in dignity and they should not be treated as mere objects but as active subjects of development. We in society, poor or rich, theologians or economists, NGOs or governments have to ensure that these rights are met and not abused. Justice needs to be restored, for the benefit of all. That is the appropriate response to poverty. The work for justice and the eradication of poverty is not a privilege, but an obligation! The Basic Income Grant is for me a step into this right direction.

Where are we in the Namibian debate?

In Namibia, we have been engaged with a lively and public debate on a Basic Income for the last three years: At the end of 2002, the Namibian Tax Consortium (NAMTAX) made the proposal for a basic income grant in Namibia. The consortium was asked to review the current tax system in order to get Namibia onto an economic growth path. The Consortium regards the reduction in poverty levels and the redistribution of income as a prerequisite for economic growth in Namibia. Therefore, the Consortium proposed a Basic Income Grant as part of their key recommendations.

In November 2004, an international conference on ‘Poverty, HIV/AIDS and a BIG in Namibia’, involving representatives of the Churches, NGOs, research institutes, and government took place on that topic. At the end, the conference resolved that “*a BIG is a necessity to reduce poverty and to promote economic empowerment*” in Namibia and that “*a coalition consisting of all possible stakeholders be established to advocate for the implementation of a BIG in Namibia*”. Under the auspice of the Desk for Social Development (ELCRN), the launch of the Namibian BIG Coalition took place on in April 2005. The coalition enjoys the support of the four big umbrella organisations in Namibia: the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN), the Federation of the Unions of Namibian Workers (NUNW), the NGO Forum and the umbrella body of the AIDS Service organisations as well as two individual organisations. At the launch, the members of the coalition committed themselves to working together with all stakeholders especially Government to make an unconditional Basic Income Grant of at least N\$100 a month per person under the age of 60 years a reality in Namibia.

Since then, the Coalition has embarked on an information campaign. By and large people in Namibia are well informed about the BIG in Namibia. People from congregations and communities throughout the country are asking: “When do we need to march for this?” The debate has attracted broad media coverage, in the printed media as well as in the radio and the television. The Coalition is in dialog

with various Government departments, Parliament, the President's and the Prime Minister's office and Cabinet. All of this is notwithstanding the fact, that there are also difficulties. The Cabinet has shown caution towards the BIG by questioning its economic and fiscal impact. Since then we have experienced quite some resistance and reluctance from certain political corners. As I said early, the road is bumpy.

We have been also feeling the pressure from international capital in the form of the IMF's involvement in the BIG debate. The IMF delegation admitted in a meeting with the BIG coalition last year that they miscalculated the costs of a BIG for the state by not calculating the recuperation from the rich through the tax system; - meaning they calculated gross- instead of net cost to the state. Despite acknowledging this mistake in the meeting with us, they still published and advised our Government that a BIG would be unaffordable based on their wrong calculations!

What I found dishonest in this political debate is that it usually hides behind the argument that the BIG would create dependency. From my point of view, people who argue like that have either not understood the concept at all or they despise the poor. For me, it is obvious, that not a Basic Income Grant, but poverty is a trap. Living in abject poverty is the ultimate state of being dependent; it is a stage where you do not have a choice and the freedom to act:

- Mothers are forced to enter into abusive and exploitative relationships to secure a roof over their head for their children and end up contracting HIV,
- people who are sick, cannot afford the travel expenses to the next clinic, but stay at home to suffer and die,
- people are forced to sell their house, because they can no longer pay the bills for the water they need to drink,

- after a hard day's work, you cannot sleep because you don't know how you and your family will make it through the next day.
- The mother of two cannot take life prolonging medicine, as she does not have any food in her stomach, unless a neighbour takes pity on her and her children again

These are situations where you are trapped in dependency and where a BIG would help free you out of this!

### **How do we win the struggle?**

Academic papers might help us to sharpen our arguments for the political debate to win us some space, but what is more important in my view, is that we take the debate to the people. We do not need to convince the people in need of a BIG. The woman who cannot take her ARVs as she has an empty stomach, the children she cannot feed, but who are forced to beg for a piece of bread, these are the people who are convincing me everyday of a BIG. We need a broad based grassroots debate! And we need to be innovative in how to reach this. For us, for example, participatory Bible Studies have been a wonderful and powerful experience in starting to mobilize people for a BIG.

Furthermore, we are increasingly aware that we should not only lobby Government to start with the Basic Income Grant, but that we should start doing what we are preaching. A stimulus in this regard has been the recent initiative by the NGO Forum of Namibia to create a fund from own fundraising activities to support initiatives within civil society. This is only a tiny, but an important step and we should discuss how such an initiative can be enhanced and support as part of the BIG campaign to serve as a best practice and prophetic model to put our words into actions.

Let us therefore network our efforts. The mere fact that we are here is an achievement. The debate on the Basic Income

Grant or universal income or 'Grundeinkommen' has become a global one. It is discussed in many different countries from Brazil to Germany, from Australia to Namibia, from Turkey to South Africa and the list goes on. This is an enormous achievement that should not be underestimated and this conference will be able to put it onto the agenda and into the public domain once again. The conference has achieved that a very diverse group of people and organisations are united in this.

We need to strengthen our regional partnerships for joint actions. Here in Southern Africa, we can certainly learn a lot from each other. We should have regular meetings, support each other and take joint actions to push for the implementation of the grant not only in one country, but in this so unequally distributed region.

The same holds for the world as a whole, we should take this global debate as a considerable force and chance. I had the privilege to visit Senator Suplicy in Brazil in the beginning of the year and the exchange has been only not been an important learning experience, but also an inspiration for all of us in the Namibian BIG Coalition. Let us build on this during these days and let us not lose focus that we have an obligation for concrete actions. Having suffered under apartheid and won our independence, the fact remains that as long as one child in Southern Africa dies of malnutrition, our struggle for freedom and democracy is not complete!