

Piloting Basic Income in Namibia – Critical reflections on the process and possible lessons

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Introduction

In 2008 to 2009, the first ever Basic Income Grant pilot project was implemented in Otjivero-Namibia. The project produced well published, extremely encouraging results in terms of social and economic development. The BIG campaign had a substantive support base within civil society, the unions and churches and received impressive international solidarity. Most importantly, the Otjivero squatter camp developed into a vibrant, inspiring community, which gave a living and tangible testimony to hundreds of national and international visitors, journalists, TV crews and researchers.

At the end of the pilot project, the payment with a reduced amount in form of a bridging allowance continued. The allowance was to 'bridge' people over up-until national implementation. The bridging allowance – although to a lesser extent than the BIG – gave some form of income security up until March 2012. Since then payments have been made sporadically due to a lack of funds. It is not certain whether and if so, when the government of Namibia will consider a national introduction.

Despite the failure to achieve national implementation so far, the pilot started and has sustained a crucial national and international debate. Yet, it is also time to take stock and to critically analyse the various national and international role-players and their interventions as well as the organisation of the Namibian campaign. Since the research results of the pilot project are well documented in two extensive research reports (Haarmann et al. 2008; Haarmann et al. 2009) this paper now looks at the process of the campaign, the implementation and the actors. It analyses some of the critical processes in retrospect and points to important factors for successes and failures. It then highlights the chances, challenges and lessons for the Namibian campaign and beyond.

For a better overview the different role-players are looked at separately in the following order:

1. The pilot project community in Otjivero
2. The Namibian BIG Coalition
3. International Organisations
4. The Namibian Government and the debate in Namibia

1. The pilot project community in Otjivero

Before the start of the pilot project, the community in Otjivero was highly fragmented and extremely impoverished. The settlement came into being when farmworkers from the surrounding farms were laid off, and had nowhere to go. The Otjivero settlement ground is owned by government, but surrounded by commercial farms. After independence people were able to settle here without being evicted, since the newly elected government protected them and the farming community had no say over this piece of land. The development of the settlement had been highly controversial from the beginning and there were persistent conflicts with the surrounding commercial farmers because of illegal hunting, trespassing and the collection of firewood. Due to these conflicts Otjivero had so far only made negative headlines in the news.

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The extent of the conflicts become clear through the following story: When the Namibian BIG Coalition had selected Otjivero as the pilot site for the BIG and it had been made public, a pastor, who was responsible for the pastoral care of the German-speaking farmers in the area at the time, contacted us. He related that in principle he was in support of the idea of a basic income, however, he cautioned about the selection of the site. In his words the Otjivero settlement was like “*cancer*”. When we inquired what he meant, he said in his opinion, the settlement was just a place of criminals and the “*scum of people*” one cannot work with. He cautioned that it would be dangerous for us to go there.

However, there was not only conflict between the surrounding farming community and the settlement, but also within the settlement. The people explained that they often lived in isolation and did not have a community. They did not visit each other or would welcome visitors as they always had to assume, that any person coming, was begging for something.

This dramatically changed through the basic income. As Otjivero resident Jonas Damaseb stated: “*Generally, the BIG has brought life to our place. Everyone can afford food and one does not see any more people coming to beg for food as in the past. What I can say is that people have gained their human dignity and have become responsible (Haarmann et al. 2009: 41).*” Since there was now a basic income in every household people started to visit each other again. At the first payout a man came literally dancing to us and asked, whether we could not see the difference. We at first did not realize what he meant and he explained that he bought a new shirt and a hat and he said “*now I can be amongst people again!*”

During the first two payouts some people had gone to the local pub (shebeens). However, the community responded with awareness raising and open discussions about this. Neighbours and family members talked to those who were drinking. They argued against using the BIG money for that purpose and warned the people not to come begging for money during the month if they had 'drank up' the BIG money. This was only possible due to the universal and transparent nature of the BIG. Furthermore the community decided together with the shebeen owners to close all shebeens during the pay-out day. The shebeen owners, who had been part of the meetings, adhered to that, with the notable exception of the affluent farmshop owner.

This is just one example of how the community managed to take charge of their own affairs and grew together as a community. Till today, visitors are impressed by the openness and friendliness the settlement welcomes visitors from all over the world with. Time and again visitors are astonished by the pride people take in keeping their small homes as well as the settlement hospitable and clean. In the six month research, one of the researchers related this: “*Through regaining their human dignity, people act more responsible: Their environment is clean and from small to the elderly everyone is dressed neatly. What a positive change! (Haarmann et al. 2009: 41)*”.

After the registration for the BIG pilot, the community of Otjivero-Omitara also embarked on a process of mobilisation, conscientisation and self-empowerment. It is important to stress that this was an entirely organic process initiated and developed by the community without outside interference. The community decided to elect a 'BIG Committee' to guide the pilot project within the community and to assist the community and the BIG Coalition wherever needed. In September 2007, an 18 member committee was elected at a community meeting. It comprised the local teachers, the nurse, the police as well as business people such as shebeen owners and community members. Representation of language and age groups was ensured. According to the guiding principles of the BIG committee, they were participating in a “*little project with a large aim. The aim is to UPLIFT the 'life' of Omitara, then Namibia, then Africa and at last the world (Haarmann et al. 2008: 45)*”.

One of the most encouraging results of the pilot project has been to witness this self-empowerment process of the community, from a divided and isolated settlement, of which people thought of thieves and criminals, to a lively, friendly and opencommunity. The testimonials of hundreds of visitors, news-teams, researchers, volunteers etc. who have been to Otjivero bear witness to this.

The empowerment process went far beyond the Otjivero community. In 2009, the community decided

to embark on an outreach to various towns in Namibia from North to South, where they explained about their experience with the BIG. They debated with other communities and motivated politicians to introduce the BIG nationally. At several public occasions, including a public lecture series at the University of Namibia, community members took it upon themselves to share their experience with the nation. In the beginning, members of the Coalition (including ourselves) were quite critical about this idea. Is it fair to the people of Otjivero to debate their own case in front of packed community meetings and with politicians and academics at panel discussions? However, the sceptics were proven wrong and the community members managed extremely well expressing their experiences and standing their ground, even though the debates were often not in their mother tongue. Support from individual politicians and from the public grew, especially through this outreach tour. Wherever they went, they filled community halls and churches. After the meetings, the visited communities were highly motivated and demanded a BIG also in their area.

The community also has to cope with a substantial influx from other poor people (and especially their children), who hoped to benefit from the money. This is despite the fact that newcomers could not register on the programme, as only one registration of the inhabitants of the settlement took place at the start of the project. One might have expected that this influx would revert the gains of building the community back into fragmentation. However, so far the community has managed this influx in a way, which did not destroy the community building.

One of the challenges for the community have been statements from people, who never met the community and have not been prepared to engage in an honest way with them. One example has been members of the farming community surrounding the settlement. From relatively early on in the project, some farmers approached the Chairperson of the Coalition and us proposing to have a discussion *about* the community. The Chairperson and us refused, saying that we cannot have a discussion *about* the community but together one could discuss *with* the community. It took the Coalition two years to convince the farming community, to finally have a direct discussion with the community, together with the BIG Coalition.

Similarly, in 2008 a researcher, Rigmar Osterkamp, who had just come from Germany and was employed at NEPRU, erroneously claimed that his secondary research (based on data gathered by the Coalition) showed, that the people of Otjivero had not been poor before the pilot started concluding that *"there are poor households in Namibia but not in Omitara"* (NEPRU 2008). By his implication the people in Otjivero therefore were themselves responsible for the malnutrition of the children etc. as they supposedly did not use the money correctly.

This researcher did not do any genuine research nor had he even been to Otjivero, yet. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to publish such a hideous claim about the people of Otjivero. The community was extremely angry and hurt, however, they did not know what to do, since this so called research was published by a renowned research institute and covered in the Namibian media.

The BIG Coalition reacted by publicly pointing out that the methodological foundation of the NEPRU analysis was completely insufficient, because it was based on average values. The NEPRU analysis did not consider the situation of individual households, but rather used the aggregate of all households in the village. Such a poverty analysis is simply wrong because the few wealthier households skewed the overall analysis and masked the actual poverty experienced by poor households. Applied to Namibia, this method would lead to the conclusion that nobody is poor in this country. On average, every Namibian is receiving a relatively high level of income. However, the reality is that a large part of the population is living in poverty, while only a few are very rich, with a relatively small number of the population falling into the category of the middle class. NEPRU admitted to this methodological mistake in a press statement stating that the numbers on which their analysis was based were *"neither suitable for determining the income poverty level at the settlement, nor are they suitable for an analysis of changes in the expenditure patterns, because of existing disparities"* (Schade 2008). The employment of this researcher at NEPRU came to an end shortly after this withdrawal of the analysis.. Nevertheless the researcher from

this day on seems to have made it his mission to try through newspaper articles and various conspiracy theories to discredit the Otjivero pilot project and especially the validity of the testimony by the Otjivero people themselves. He kept on talking about them and never with them. In 2010 with the aid of another German national who also had only just recently come to Namibia, he tried to discredit the BIG Coalition's pilot project. He claimed that the BIG Project in Namibia was supposedly not a Namibian project, but a guinea pig for some German parliamentarians, who would like to boost a BIG in Namibia to prove the case for a BIG in Germany (Rigmar Osterkamp 2010a, 2010b). However, all of these attacks, since they could not be substantiated, had very little impact on public opinion in Namibia.

2. The Namibian BIG Coalition

Following the independence of Namibia in 1990, the country's tax system had not undergone a comprehensive revision, when in 2001 the Namibian Government appointed a Tax Commission (NAMTAX) to review the entire tax system. The commission was tasked to make the necessary international and regional comparisons, to address redistribution and to determine the structural changes needed (NAMTAX 2002: 8–9). NAMTAX found that, firstly, Namibia is characterized by extreme disparities in income, as shown by the highest measured Gini coefficient in the world; and secondly, Namibia has a very serious problem of poverty (NAMTAX 2002). They recommended as by far the best method of addressing poverty and inequality would be a universal income grant, which became known as the Basic Income Grant (BIG).

Except for a few newspaper articles supporting the proposal as *good news for the poor*, for a long time there was silence on this proposal. Government had been keen on taking on recommendations of the NAMTAX commission on the income revenue side, like the proposed Capital Gains Tax, but was silent on the BIG.

The Desk for Social Development (DfSD) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) took up the proposal for the universal grant and discussed it within several communities to find out whether poor people themselves regarded it as a worthwhile programme to pursue. By 2004, the proposal had received so much grass-roots support and was endorsed by the ELCRN Synod that the DfSD organised an international conference on income security, bringing together Namibian civil society, the line ministries of development and international experts in the field.

The conference resolved to establish a BIG coalition in Namibia. On April 27th 2005, the coalition was officially launched in Windhoek. It consists of six umbrella bodies in Namibia, namely the Council of Churches (CCN), the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), the Namibian NGO Forum (NANGOF), the Namibian Network of AIDS Service Organisations (NANASO), the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Church Alliance for Orphans (CAFO). The aim of the BIG Coalition is to work together with the Namibian government to implement an unconditional basic income grant to all citizens of Namibia in order to reduce poverty, inequality, and foster social and economic development. The BIG Coalition members committed themselves to the following:

- *We resolve that the Basic Income Grant is a necessity to reduce poverty and to promote economic empowerment, freeing the productive potential of the people currently trapped in the vicious and deadly cycle of poverty.*
- *We agree that every Namibian should receive a Basic Income Grant until she or he becomes eligible for a government pension at 60 years.*
- *The level of the Basic Income Grant should be not less than N\$ 100 per person per month.*
- *The Basic Income Grant should be an unconditional grant to every Namibian.*
- *The costs for the Basic Income Grant should be recovered through a combination of progressively designed tax reforms. (Basic Income Grant Coalition (Namibia) 2005)*

For the first two years, the Coalition embarked on an extensive lobby campaign based on research and economic modelling. However, even detailed economic models and tax effort analyses could not convince Government to introduce a basic income, and the debate did not move forward. While some in Government supported a BIG right from the beginning, critics claimed that a BIG would lead to dependency and laziness and pointed to the fact that a BIG had never been implemented anywhere in the world.

At the end of 2006, a delegation of the BIG Coalition attended the BIEN Congress in Cape Town. It became the turning-point of the Namibian BIG campaign, when the delegation realised that researchers in other countries, had discussed a BIG already for decades without it ever being implemented. The understanding grew that something drastic and different needed to be done, since Namibia would not have the time to debate for years without any concrete impact on people's lives. It was there at the BIEN congress that the BIG Coalition decided to move from words to action. The idea of the first pilot project of a universal cash grant was born. It is noteworthy that this understanding had grown among the Namibian delegation and some academics from South Africa, who had a similar experience of inequality and structural poverty. In fact, the idea did not find the support of the majority of the gathering. However, despite the scepticism, the proposal stimulated the debate at the conference; and Namibia's BIG Coalition's chairperson Bishop Kameeta, who had introduced the new idea in the plenary, was termed “the butt-kicker” of the conference.

The idea of the pilot was in fact not naïve, but rooted in the experience of the liberation struggle in Southern Africa, where English Medium Schools or township clinics often challenged the regime to revise otherwise ideological hardened positions. Furthermore, it drew on the experience with pilot projects in other countries where national programmes had been implemented, when the pilots had proven their viability. For example, pilot projects in Haiti, Rwanda and South Africa demonstrated that antiretroviral treatment could be provided effectively to poor people – even to those living in deep rural areas. The pilots helped change national and international policy, thereby paving the way for the dramatic global roll-out of antiretrovirals (ARVs). The BIG Coalition hoped that by operationalizing a BIG pilot project, Government leaders and others could see how the BIG could be transformed into a national programme. In 2007, the BIG Coalition decided to implement a pilot project to move the policy debate forward and to evaluate and document the impact of a Basic Income Grant on poverty and on sustainable economic livelihoods of individuals as well as on the community.

The Namibian BIG Coalition deliberately did not set-up an own legal organisation with extra staff, but worked through the commitment of the member organisations. The Directors of the ELCRN's Desk for Social Development functioned as the Coalition's Co-ordinators, responsible for the organisation and management of the Coalition, the pilot project and the campaign. The Desk served as the legal home of the Coalition, responsible for contracts, accounts and audits. The Co-ordinators chaired the BIG Secretariat consisting of about 8-10 persons from different member organisations. The Secretariat met about every other week to discuss the way forward, plan and prepare actions and events, react to issues as they arise and communicate with the Otjivero community. The structure of these meetings were grass-roots democratic and decisions were taken and executed by the collective. Equally public functions like press-conferences, international conferences, regular visits to the pilot community, meetings with politicians etc. were assigned together with a focus of sharing these responsibilities equally among the Coalition members.

The role of the DfSD then was the day-to-day running of the advocacy and media campaign, the co-ordination of the activities of the members of the Coalition like the active engagement with Government and international bodies. The DfSD also oversaw and managed the implementation of the pilot project, maintaining the registration data and to plan and conduct the research on the social and economic impact of the pilot project together with LARRI. The DfSD compiled the research,

information as well as campaign material and published them both in print and by maintaining a website and a mailing list.

At least every two months, the BIG Coalition Committee with representatives of at least all umbrella bodies and the BIG Secretariat met to determine and direct the Coalition's overall policy decisions. Furthermore, the chairperson of the Coalition has been Bishop Dr. Z. Kameeta. His visionary and charismatic leadership and his political standing in Namibia and around the world has been crucial for the success of the project.

After the completion of the pilot project at the end of 2009, the payout of the BIG pilot project bridging allowance had been secured up-until mid 2011 and the programme funding of the DfSD up-until the end of 2011. In January 2010, the leadership of the DfSD changed and new directors took over. The new leadership style dramatically changed the nature and the running of the Coalition: Secretariat and Committee meetings were only held sporadically, often minutes were not taken or distributed, the register of the community was not updated (e.g. people who died were not taken of the payroll and no new care-takers were assigned for their dependant), no audits were prepared. Members of the BIG committee in Otjivero complained that they were not consulted and that contact from the side of the Coalition was only kept with a selected few community members. At the same time the staff component of the DfSD was substantially increased, yet no new campaign material or publications were developed. In terms of fundraising, the DfSD concentrated on procuring new funds for the running of the DfSD with rather little tangible impact on campaign, media presence or other results. The fundraising for the payouts in Otjivero were neglected and only resumed in mid 2011, once funds had run out. In short, the BIG movement was turned into an NGO, where the well-being of the organisation rather than the campaign took centre stage.

3. International Organisations

The pilot-project was commended by the UN Commission on Social Development and by the LWF as best-practised model in development. However, not all international organisation were so supportive of the pilot project. The following incidents demonstrate the negative role of the IMF.

In June 2005, an IMF delegation visited Namibia. They also set up a meeting with the National NGO Forum (NANGOF), a founding member of the BIG Coalition. The NANGOF Forum presented the BIG proposal, however, the IMF representative related the following to them: *"He is very disappointed that Namibia is even considering such an idea. Namibia is in fact not doing so bad, poverty is not as bad as in other countries, a comparison was even made that in Kenya the shacks are much worse than here in Namibia and the roads here are much better also. A BIG would be a non-starter and not at all affordable for Namibia. He would also advise the Ministry of Finance in this regard. In conclusion, Namibia would just need to tighten her belt and then things would get better."* (Email exchange between BIG Co-ordinators and IMF public relations department 2005)

With the help of a NGO representative in New York, the BIG Coalition Secretariat complained to the IMF about this unsubstantiated negative advice. The IMF responded that since the person was part of the office of the Executive Director of one of the two African constituencies and not part of the IMF Article IV mission: *"This means that [...] IMF staff have not expressed any views on the Basic Income Grant."* (Email exchange between BIG Co-ordinators and IMF public relations department 2005) However, the Article IV mission based on this first engagement sought to meet with the BIG Coalition.

During this first official meeting, which took place in 2005, the IMF presented calculations apparently showing that the BIG in Namibia would cost 5.5% of GDP and would thereby be unaffordable. However, the BIG coalition successfully refuted these calculations and explained that the IMF was confusing gross and net costs. The IMF at that meeting admitted that their figures were based on oversimplified gross-cost calculations and that the real cost to the state are the net-costs, which amount

to 2.2% to 3.8% of GDP as verified by independent research commissioned by the BIG Coalition. The IMF agreed to redo its calculations and change them accordingly. The BIG Coalition was then dismayed to find that the IMF in its report to Government published the already proven wrong calculations. Based on these wrong calculations, the IMF advised the Namibian Government, that the BIG would not make economic sense as “*IMF’s staff calculations*” apparently found that it could compromise fiscal sustainability in Namibia.

The BIG Coalition confronted the IMF during their next visit in November 2006. The chief of the Article IV Mission, Mr. J. Müller, again conceded the IMF's overstatement of the costs in its report to the Namibian Government by at least 2% of GDP. Nevertheless, he was adamant that the IMF would not redo or correct the calculations, as it would not change [sic!] the IMF's position on the affordability of a BIG. When challenged for the research evidence as the basis of the IMF's advice, they admitted that they did not do any real cost calculation, nor had they done a tax effort analysis in order to determine affordability and sustainability levels. The IMF further had to concede that the costing models and the tax effort analysis done by EPRI for the BIG Coalition are the standard economic tools usually applied in evidence-based policy advice. Despite this economic evidence by the BIG Coalition and the arguments for the positive social and developmental impact of a BIG to curb the high and unsustainable levels of poverty in Namibia, the IMF delegation made its opposition to the BIG clear. The IMF insisted that it will continue to advise government accordingly. It thus is obvious that the IMF entered the debate against the BIG on pure ideological grounds and not based on economic or social considerations!

4. *The Namibian Government and the debate in Namibia*

The initial reaction of Government to the launch of the BIG Coalition was supportive towards the BIG proposal. The Prime Minister, Nahas Angula, even claimed ownership of the BIG proposal. At a press conference he reminded the Coalition that the original proposal was brought up by Government (New Era, 9th May 2005). However, the enthusiasm of the Prime Minister was quickly dampened when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) intervened in the debate:

Closely following the IMF's arguments as outlined above, the Prime Minister informed the BIG Coalition in May 2006 about a Cabinet resolution that a BIG would “*not be viable and make no economic sense*”. (New Era, 23rd May 2006)

The BIG Coalition's exposure of the intervention of the IMF as ideological-driven and not substantiated by economic calculations (BIG Coalition Press release 20th November 2006), however, was able to open up the debate in Government again a year later.

The predecessor of the current Prime Minister, Hage Geingob, called on his Government to introduce the Basic Income Grant (Namibian, 6th March 2007). He was also the first to contribute to the fund for the implementation of the Basic Income Grant Pilot Project.

The debate gained momentum and got more concrete with the release of the first results of the pilot in September 2008 and ultimately with the results in April 2009. There has been extended and detailed media coverage both nationally and internationally. Never before has Namibia seen such an intense and constructive debate about poverty alleviation, redistribution and economic empowerment. The English and the Afrikaans media have been extremely supportive. There have been a few hostile articles in the Namibian-German press, mainly from parts of the farming community worried about possible influx into Otjivero and about a shift in the power base, with the community becoming much more self-assertive.

Public support and support from individual politicians grew, especially when the community of Otjivero embarked on its outreach tour. Yet, it is by no means clear, whether a national BIG will see the light of day. While the political leadership has never commented on the pilot project directly, some

have made concerted efforts to put an end to the debate. The Prime Minister tried to dismiss the BIG as “*not a normal concept [...] making a joke out of the poor*” (Namibian 22nd October 2009). When challenged about BIG in Parliament, the President dismissed the idea similarly cynical by saying “*We can't dish out money for free to people who do nothing*”. (Namibian, 20th April 2010) Both have charged that it would be nonsensical and that it would send out the wrong incentives, to give all people – including themselves - money.

This critique of the BIG looks surprisingly misinformed as they seem not to have engaged and acquainted themselves with the basic concept nor the research results and economic calculations. They made these claims despite qualifying themselves for the universal old-age pension, so in any case they would not be eligible for a BIG. Furthermore, given their income, they would have to pay much more than they receive through the proposed increase in taxes necessary to finance the grant. Therefore, they would be net-payers. Interestingly, as leaders of a liberation movement, they retort with neo-liberal arguments against the BIG, firmly grounded in the belief that everybody gets what he deserves and therefore put the blame of poverty on the poor themselves. Whether really misinformed or out of political calculation they have presented their critique at a level that completely ignores the hardship of people living in poverty, individuals' experience and the results of the pilot project.

Following these arguments of the political leadership of the country, the union bosses, in alliance with the ruling party subsequently decided to pull out of the BIG Coalition. They could not conceal from the public that there was no factual basis for their change in opinion; rather, that it was out of loyalty to what was perceived as the position of the party leadership (Namibian, 20th July 2010). During this debate, the chairperson of the BIG Coalition called on Government to form a consultative forum to put the discussion back to the evidence and the research. This was supported by public opinion, but it did not garner any response from the government. (Namibian, 14th May 2010)

Then the unexpected happened. The union's leadership announcement to pull out of the BIG Coalition resulted in a massive public outcry against the hypocrisy and neo-liberal policies of the leadership. Everyday, the newspapers were full of letters and SMSes in support of the BIG (Namibian Cartoon, 19th July 2010). Most importantly, the 600 delegates of the union's Congress forced the BIG issue onto the agenda and, uniquely since independence, revoked a decision by their leadership and resolved to rejoin the BIG Coalition. This popular comeback of the BIG has added a completely new dimension to the pressure within the ruling party towards national implementation. This is uncharted ground for the ruling party. So far, they have always been able to silence internal opposition as disloyalty to the party except in this case (Namibian, Observer 10th September 2010).

Since the BIG Coalition in the past two years has no longer engaged government or society actively, the pressure for an immediate nationwide implementation has been also reduced substantially. The Otjivero community with their experience is still a living example on which a campaign could be based and picked up again. Given the nature of Namibian politics, an implementation without public pressure seems unlikely and if at all, depends on the in-coming SAWPO leadership and their personal positioning towards a BIG. Since inequality, poverty and unemployment are persisting on such high levels the obvious need is still there.

Lessons for the future struggle

The strength of the BIG campaign lies in the grass-roots democratic movement unleashed through this unconditional grant to everybody. There has been nothing so powerful in convincing critics than to give them a chance to physically go to Otjivero and simply have them talk to the people and hear about the experiences themselves.

The lobby work by the pilot project community itself has been most direct and highly effective, since the discussion then moved from concepts to concrete people, their life stories and actual experience.

At the level of the BIG Coalition, the synergy between a charismatic leadership and technical expertise

and hands on communication and co-ordination was crucial.

The teamwork of the Coalition being representative of the broad spectrum of civil society in Namibia has certainly been a chance for the success of the project. Since inequality and poverty are so extreme in Namibia and the BIG presents a direct and workable answer to this, the Coalition grew to become the biggest civil society movement in Namibia after independence. Keeping the Coalition members directly involved, and not outsource the BIG campaign to an own NGO but rather keeping it as core business of all members involved has been crucial. People could contribute as equal partners and were driven by the unified goal. Their contribution was voluntary without own financial interest involved. Decisions were not taken by a selected leadership but by consent, thereby people had ownership in this grass-roots democratic process.

The shift from a grass-roots democratic movement towards an NGO type structure favouring positions and hierarchy over voluntarism and political commitment has sadly weakened the campaign for a BIG in Namibia. It is this lack of keeping alive and following the grass-roots democratic spirit in Otjivero that weakens the national campaign.

This spirit, which has developed exactly through the universal income grant in Otjivero, would need to be translated into the campaign again.

A movement towards a universal income grant is a programme for a more equal distribution of wealth. Any campaign needs to take into account the influence of conservative international organisations like the IMF and certain development agencies, who fight for the vested interests of big capital.

Last but not least the lessons proof that a successful campaign requires a strong link between a grass-roots movement putting public pressure on Government coupled with an evidence-based campaign to create the political space for effective lobby work of the masses.

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