

'Now we can walk tall': BIG grant changing lives in Namibia - Feature

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Otjivero, Namibia - Joseph Ganeb proudly wears a sign marked "control officer" pinned to his shirt. With his deep voice and boisterous laughter he greets everyone in Namibia's Otjivero settlement by name. "So, are you going to be able to buy shoes for your grandson today?" he asks an old lady in the local Damara vernacular.



"Make sure you don't carry it all to the shebeen (pub)," he warns another as villagers leave their tin shacks to queue up under a huge camel thorn tree at the centre of the settlement.

Since the introduction in January of the BIG (Basic Income Grant) pilot project in this camp previously notorious for alcoholism and petty crime, Ganeb has become a kind of moral overseer.

He ensures that the 100 Namibia dollars (about 13 US dollars) dished out monthly to everyone in the settlement under sixty years of age does not go to waste.

"I am so very happy about this project," he tells me. "Now we don't have to go like dogs with the tail between our legs and beg for credit any more. We can walk tall and proud."

The 1,200 odd inhabitants of Otjivero, a shantytown about 100 kilometres east of the Namibian capital Windhoek, are out to prove that the tiny grant currently funded through donations from civil society is more a leg-up than handout for the poorest of the poor.

Namibia, a sparsely populated desert country of 2 million people, is one of the most unequal societies in the world. Three out of four live below the poverty line, with the wealth largely divided along racial lines.

"I have four children. I want to improve my house and enlarge it," one young woman says, adding that once she has saved a few pennies she would like to open a clothing store.

Magdalena Smit returns home with 500 dollars a month, with which she says she is now able to properly feed her four children.

"I use half for the household, the other half I put aside for things unexpected, like when a child falls ill or needs something for school. It really feels good to know there's enough to last you until the end of the month."

Critics of the project are worried the money will increase people's dependence on the state.

"It may be great for starters, but I'm afraid the money will eventually all go to alcohol. I think it would be much better to get people employed than to hand them a bit of cash," a farmer in the area, who did not wish to be named, said.

Not so, says Bishop Zephania Kameeta from the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the driving force behind the grant.

"In September, Otjivero was very dirty and neglected. It was a scene of despair and hopelessness. The smile on the faces now speaks a different language. People are proud. They have the means to clothe themselves. They appear decent when going for a job interview.

"If anything, having something gives people a perspective and so reduces dependence. With something in their pocket they can plan, they can be innovative, they have a chance of participating in the economic activity of a country," Kameeta adds.

The improvements at the settlement are evident. Most children no longer run around in rags, and the school is able to buy toner for its printer, because, for the first time in years, parents have paid their kids' school fees.

This in turn, says Claudia Haarman of the BIG secretariat, leads to people taking more responsibility for their lives.

"Now that they have paid their fees, they (the parents) feel they have a right to get involved and see to it that their children get a proper education," Haarman said.

The same goes for the local clinic. In the past, the nurse had to call in an ambulance a couple of times a month to take malnourished children to the district hospital 70 kilometres away.

Since the grant, this has not happened. In another positive sign, residents living with HIV are now also regularly attending the clinic for counselling and life-prolonging antiretroviral drugs.

The Basic Income Grant was first proposed by a government-appointed tax commission in 2002 as way of levelling the playing field in one of the world's most unequal societies.

The government wasn't sold on the idea at the time but has indicated it might reconsider if the two-year Otjivero pilot project proves successful.

In the event of a national roll-out, the commission has recommended the grant be paid to all Namibian citizens below pensionable age, irrespective of their income.

The money paid to citizens not in need could be recuperated through taxation, the commission advised.



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