A BIG Grant For Little People?

IN January 2008, the Basic Income Grant (BIG) pilot project commenced in the Otjivero-Omitara area, a settlement approximately 100 kilometres east of Windhoek. From December 2007 to December 2009 all participants in the project receive a Basic Income Grant of N$100 per person per month, without any conditions being attached.

Before the introduction of the BIG, Otjivero-Omitara was characterised by unemployment, hunger and poverty. Most residents had settled there because they had nowhere else to go, their lives were shaped by deprivation and they had little hope for the future. An assessment report for the project, released in April 2009, showed a very different picture. Since the introduction of the BIG, household poverty has dropped significantly.

Access to the BIG has enabled people living with HIV/AIDS to have access to nutritious food and medication. The BIG has contributed to a significant reduction of crime. The list of positive changes that access to just N$100 per month can achieve goes on.

The aim of this article is to focus on one particular sector of society - children. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare has engaged the public in a debate about the changes needed to the draft Child Care and Protection Bill. This bill will replace the Children’s Act of 1960, and the implementation of this new law will be a huge step forward in the protection of the rights and welfare of children in Namibia. However there is something missing in the bill: the provision of grants.

Now imagine a new situation – in every household, each and every child (or even each adult) receives a grant.

The provision of the BIG has significantly contributed to improved school attendance and eating nutritious food, going to the clinic when medical attention is needed – are possible. Suddenly the very simple things that seemed impossible – buying new school uniforms, buying medicine, paying school fees (90%) and most of the children now have school uniforms.

Firstly, the BIG has resulted in a huge reduction in child malnutrition. Using a WHO measurement technique, the data shows that in just one year the number of underweight children decreased from 42% to just 10%. Secondly, before the introduction of the BIG, almost half of the school-going children did not attend school regularly.

Pass rates stood at about 40% and dropout rates were high. Many parents were unable to pay school fees. After the introduction of the BIG, more than double the number of parents paid school fees (90%) and most of the children now have school uniforms.

In just one year, the dropout rate fell to almost 0%. At the beginning of 2009, the principal of the school also reported that for the first time, a group of 9 learners, who passed grade 7, left Otjivero and are able to attend Secondary School.

In light of these findings, the BIG Coalition would like to use the opportunity of the revision of the Child Care and Protection Bill to draw attention to the need for a provision of a grant system for all people in Namibia. The impact of a grant goes far beyond malnutrition and school attendance.

The current burden on the government to administer and monitor situation-dependant grants is immense. This time and money could be better spent. There are also some disadvantages of the current grant system for children: in practice, access to the grant is often hampered by complex criteria and application procedures, which effectively exclude many intended beneficiaries who are actually amongst the most vulnerable. This is often because they cannot assemble the necessary documentation, or because they lack the resources to negotiate the system.

A further limitation of the current grant system is that it can potentially lead to abuse, discrimination and unintended consequences in the caring household. Children who are eligible to receive a grant might be regarded as “different” to the other children in the household and may be abused or mistreated because they are seen as an additional burden to the household. In some instances, relatives might fight over who will care for an orphaned child, not for the love of the child but to have access to the grant that will accompany the child.

Besides these reasons, there is one more, very strong, argument in support of a grant for all children, a grant for all people. The BIG pilot project has found that there has been substantial in-migration to the Otjivero-Omitara area. People who were not present at the start of the pilot project have joined some of the households to benefit from the fund. Unsurprisingly, analysis shows that the impact of the grant in these households is lower than the impact in households where in-migration has not occurred. The example of Otjivero-Omitara is a microcosm of reality. In many real life situations, a child who is the recipient of a foster care grant will be just one of many children and many adults living in a household.

The N$200 received for this child will naturally pay towards not only the care of this child but for all the others in the household as well. Sometimes that N$200 may be the only source of income the entire family has. The impact of that N$200 on the life of that child will be very different to a situation where there is just one child in a household and both caregivers are working. In this second situation, the money can be used to buy a school uniform, or schoolbooks rather than simply to pay for food for the entire family.

The two examples show that the impact of the current grant system can be very different, with some children receiving little or no benefit from the grant.

Now imagine a new situation – in every household, each and every child (or even each individual) receives a grant. Suddenly the very simple things that seemed impossible – buying new school uniforms, eating nutritious food, going to the clinic when medical attention is needed – are possible.

The BIG pilot project in Otjivero-Omitara has shown the wide-ranging benefits.

The provision of the BIG has significantly contributed to improved school attendance and child development. This happened without any outside pressure or attachment of conditionalities to the cash transfer. People themselves decided what was good for their children.

All they needed was the income to do so. We would like to urge the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare to support the BIG project and consider how the provision of grants can be included in the Child Care and Protection Bill to ensure that all children in Namibia are better off.

THE END
The BIG is more than an income support programme. It is a means of reinforcing human dignity and empowerment, and enabling families to give their children a better future. Change is needed to the grant system in Namibia. This time of change, when a 50-year-old law on children is being replaced by a new and visionary bill, provides the ideal opportunity to add one more vision – hope for all people through the provision of just N$100 per month. The pilot project in Otjivero-Omitara has proven the potential enormous positive developmental impact of a national BIG and the good news is that independent research has clearly shown that such a grant is affordable for Namibia.

Granted, the BIG will not solve all of the problems in Namibia. But the provision of a BIG will make a substantial and positive difference to the lives of children in Namibia, that you can take for granted.

BIG Coalition
Via e-mail

Note: This BIG pilot project is designed and implemented by the Namibian Basic Income Grant Coalition (established in 2004) and is the first universal cash-transfer pilot project in the world. The BIG Coalition consists of five large umbrella bodies in Namibia, namely, Council of Churches (CCN), the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), the Namibian NGO Forum (Nangof), the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Namibian Network of AIDS Service Organisations (Nananso).