



CONTRIBUTION

BY

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**ON THE SECOND READING OF THE APPROPRIATION BILL
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members,

I have considered the budget as a whole. For the most part I agree with many of the fiscal decisions that have been taken. That being said, there are a few areas of concern within the budget that I would like to highlight and get clarity on.

Honourable Speaker

During last year's budget debate I already raised the concern that it is not clear what the unique role of the Ministry of Poverty Eradication will be. A year on and it isn't even less clear why a Ministry had to be created to perform a cross-cutting function that should be performed by all Ministries, Offices and Agencies collectively.

A year on and it appears that the only unique initiative that has been brought by the Ministry of Poverty Eradication is the Food Bank *Pilot* Program. A program which as has already been mentioned by other speakers before me is not without many administrative problems.

The payment of social grants and pension was already being performed by other existing departments, so this should not be made out to be a new function.

Honourable Members

The amount budgeted towards salaries and operational costs for this Ministry is well over N\$ 42 Million. 42 Million that could have been better spent by previously existing Ministries and departments in the fight against poverty, instead of creating more staff to pay to perform functions that were already being done by other civil servants in the past.

The question one has to ask is what are these people being paid to do – when one considers the fact that the only new initiative from the Ministry of Poverty Eradication & Social Welfare is the Food Bank Pilot Program, then surely spending 42 Million for people to distribute food is not the most cost effective manner in which this money could have been spent. Are we really doing “more with less”, when one looks at such strange decisions?

The Council of Churches previously tried and also piloted a program very similar to the Food bank. The program was eventually abandoned as food ended up being stolen and sold and not reaching the intended targets. It would be a good idea if the Ministry were to consult with the Council of Churches to get their inputs on what the failures and successes were of their Food bank program.

In as much as I understand the argument that the Ministry of Poverty eradication was intended to “boost” the fight against poverty, this has unfortunately not proven to be case in reality. All the creation of this Ministry has done is further

increase the public service wage bill, which the Minister of Finance has already admitted is “unsustainably high”.

Honourable Speaker

Poverty reduction ~~and~~ an improvement in the provision of social services will not happen automatically because a new Ministry is created. Instead, what is needed is to strengthen the operational capacity of those Ministries who have the potential to directly impact on the livelihoods and well-being of our people. In this regard, I refer specifically to the Ministry of Health & Social Services and the two ministries concerned with education.

To use one just one example, people who are on ARV and TB treatment do not only need to be provided with free or subsidized medication, but that medication needs to be taken along with certain foods. Sadly, due to the impact of these diseases, many of these people find themselves out of work and do not have the money to buy the nutritious food required in order to make the medication effective. Taking the medicine without taking in the right food reduces the impact of the medicine. Because of this, I would recommend that since the medication is collected on a monthly basis, patients collecting medicine are also given food parcels to help improve the effectiveness of the medication.

Many people default on taking their medicine due to hunger and also because some of the medicine indirectly induces hunger by driving a desire to eat. When

you know that the medication make you feel hungry, but you do not have food, what automatically happens is that you start to default.

Introducing measures such as these will significantly enhance the quality of life of our people. Instead of targeting random people for food banks, one would be better served targeting specific groups of people whose needs are obvious and measurable and not open to the discretion of biased “community members”.

Honourable Members

I recognize and appreciate the efforts of the Ministry of Education in providing food parcels to selected learners in some schools. However, when only some learners in a school are given food parcels, it leads to victimization of those learners. We all know how children are...those learners who receive food parcels are labelled poor and told by their peers that their parents do not care about them and don't even give them food. This victimization has meant that even when a learner is genuinely in need of the food parcels, they would rather keep quiet and go hungry because they are afraid of the stigma that goes with it.

A better approach would be to provide meals to all primary and secondary school learners during the early morning interval. This once again represents a needy identifiable group that would be much better served being recipients of the food bank. And most importantly, it will see the performance of learners improve as it will reduce victimization and lack of concentration brought about by hunger.

Honourable Members

Two other easily identifiable target groups are people living with disability and OVCs (Orphans and Vulnerable Children). With each passing year, the old age pension payment is being increased, but the same adjustment has not been made in respect of grants for OVCs and people living with disability. Their needs are as big, if not bigger than those of pensioners.

Why then can these two vulnerable groups not serve as targeted beneficiaries of the Food Bank Scheme? It would significantly alleviate poverty as these two groups are some of the most hard-hit and affected by poverty. In addition to this; I believe an increment in social grant payments for these two groups should also be urgently considered.

Honourable Speaker

Article 45 of the Namibian Constitution provides that “members of the National Assembly shall be representatives of all the people and shall in the performance of their duties be guided by the objectives of this Constitution, by the Public Interest and by their conscience.”

Aside from this, the responsibility of the National Assembly and Parliament as a whole to provide an oversight function and monitor the implementation of government projects.

The Appropriation Bill represents how revenue from the National Reserve Fund (or “Treasury”) will be divided and spent over the course of that financial year in achieving different aims and for the implementation of different projects.

It is our responsibility as Members of Parliament to see to it that laws tabled and passed in this House are properly implemented. Here in lies our oversight function.

My question is: how are we, as MPS and as back benchers, expected to perform our constitutionally mandated oversight function if Committees are not permitted to travel and perform this exact function, and are simply told “there is no money.” It is one thing to pass the Appropriation Bill, but our duty does not stop there. We also have a duty to ensure that it is properly implemented and public resources are not wasted.

In order to properly perform this oversight function, it is not enough for MPs to just attend Committee meetings. The Committees need to go out onto the ground and monitor the progress of projects we have financed through the Appropriation Bill.

Currently, it has become near impossible for MPs to properly fulfil their oversight function as elected office bearers. It must be clear that MPs are not civil servants, but elected public office bearers specifically elected to perform an oversight function.

It is not enough for us to just pay lip service to what our role should be, when we know that once we return to the Parliamentary Standing Committees we will be told that there are no resources available to fulfil our constitutional obligations.

If the budget does not and cannot make sufficient provision for back benchers to perform this critical function, then perhaps it is best Parliament is disbanded.

Honourable Members,

ALAN (the Association of Local Authorities in Namibia) is supposedly the mouth piece of all Local Authorities in Namibia. However, ALAN is not formally recognised by Government.

It is therefore very confusing to find that the very same institution which is not formally recognized is directly receiving N\$ 500,000.00 (Page 59, Estimates of Revenue, Income & Expenditure) annually from the Ministry of Urban & Rural Development.

Can the Honourable Minister of Finance please clarify for me whether there is any legal justification for directly funding an unrecognized institution with tax payer's money, and also whether such institution publishes annual audited reports to indicate how it spends tax payers money.

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members

In general, I support the budget.

I am however yet to be convinced that the Ministry of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare in its current mode of operation has justified a 14% increase from last year's budget allocation. Especially when one considers that both the Ministries of Health & Social Services and Education, Arts and Culture have seen large cuts to their budgets.

I am also deeply concerned by 33.6% reduction in the National Assembly budget, which makes it impossible for MPs to properly perform their oversight function.

Thank You.

