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Is BIG big enough? Basic Income Grant in Namibia.

An anthropological enquiry.

Report

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1. Introduction: Questions to BIG by an anthropologist

The Namibian Basic Income Grant project has been under scientific monitoring ever since it started in 2007. Cultural anthropologists, however, have not been engaged in the process until now. Who are they and what do they have to say about BIG? Anthropologists look into cultural systems, values and social norms to explain why some people behave, react and believe differently to others. Compared to politics and economics, cultural facts are very often not thought to be of prime importance, but they might indeed be the clue to many problems arising, precisely because they were not taken into consideration in the first place. In multicultural countries such as Namibia (as in most other countries worldwide), there are several different ways of life, each of them making sense to those who adhere to them. What people do and how they live, what is considered to be right or wrong seem to be perfectly obvious to some – but not necessarily to all. The different sides might even consider each other's life style as strange and unacceptable. It is not so much that people deliberately dominate others with their views but that they simply do not *know* much about each other.

The Namibian BIG project is a fine example of how diverse concepts and views of life have come to a clash. To start with, BIG was meant to improve living conditions and make life better, especially for those forced to live in poverty. Everyone would agree that this was a good idea. On closer consideration, however, we must realize that what makes “a good life” is debatable. In Namibia, these issues were not discussed in advance, since it seemed all too clear what was needed: A good life is the absence of poverty, perceived in terms of material, nutritional and social wellbeing. To improve life, individuals should be endowed with the means to achieve the alleviation of poverty, and preferably in a sustainable way. In this context, sustainability is understood as an effect lasting beyond the single activity by which it was triggered. It was also agreed that a change for the better could only be achieved by *economic* improvements. The discussions therefore focused mainly on the *means* that could be offered – cash or kind – and not on what they could be used for. On the contrary, spending options were held out of the debate as too many people seemed to know exactly what was good for poor people and what was not. There were also many who were convinced that poor people would be “incapable of making rational spending decisions to improve their lives”.¹ Nonetheless, it was eventually decided to pay out a monthly allowance in cash, *assuming* that this would help to improve the economic conditions for the individual beneficiaries and for society at large. We should be aware of the fact that this, too, was a culturally specific way of *looking* not only at what BIG was supposed to improve but also at the *expected* outcome. The complications that developed arose from the fact that the project itself was designed by persons from diverse cultural backgrounds and was then also influenced by international actors appearing on the scene as BIG attracted worldwide attention.

Very early in the process, BIG became a political issue with discussions concentrating on the pros and cons of administering *unconditional* financial grants. What did not appear essential was the need to investigate the question how BIG would be used in a specific cultural setting. This is where the anthropologist comes in. Being aware of the fact that people undoubtedly appreciate any kind of

¹ See the arguments prior to the implementation of the pilot project in Haarmann, Claudia et al. 2008: “Towards a basic income grant for all!” Pilot Project Assessment Report 2008. Ed. by Basic Income Grant Windhoek: NANGOF, p. 12; Haarmann et al. 2009: Making the difference! Basic Income Grant Pilot Project Assessment Report 2009. Ed. by Basic Income Grant Coalition. Windhoek: NANGOF, p. 40.

extra support but will certainly not change their way of life to gain it, my question was: *What influence do cultural factors have on the appropriation and handling of income grants?* The results of this enquiry², carried out between August and October 2011, may shed some light on the importance of culture in social welfare systems. It might also enhance our understanding of how systems of social security in other parts of Africa are affected by cultural factors in general. It was in no way meant to challenge the results achieved by BIG so far. This report provides some extra information to those who are in charge of the project as well as to all those who are interested in Namibian cultures.

2. BIG Namibia: Starting point

What makes BIG Namibia special is that the project originated within the country and was not one of the many initiatives brought in by international developmental organizations. It was part of the proposals of the Namibian tax consortium (NAMTEX) which was appointed as a governmental committee installed to devise a tax reform for Namibia. NAMTEX faced an overall situation in which half the population lived (and still does so today) close to or below the minimum standard of living, while the top 20% of the population receive almost 80% of the national income.³ One of the proposals presented by NAMTEX in 2002 therefore included a plan for some kind of redistribution of national revenue in order to help those in need and thus reduce overall social inequality. NAMTEX also suggested a method by which this could be achieved: The grant of a monthly allowance to every Namibian citizen, leaving out only those who already receive social welfare such as old age pensions, special allowances for the disabled or other annuities. This would amount to approx. 1.2 million Namibians with every person – independent of age, gender, ethnic affiliation or private possession – on the list. It should be borne in mind that the idea of granting an *unconditional* monthly allowance was originally designed mainly for *practical* reasons: In a small population such as that of Namibia it would be far easier to distribute the funds without means-testing, rather than having to set up a costly administrative apparatus which would need to spend time and money to find out who is eligible to become a beneficiary and who is not. It would also reduce bureaucracy by facilitating distribution mechanisms and at the same time curb corruption.

In order to initiate BIG, a pilot project was established as a test with a view to making a final decision at its conclusion. Otjivero proved to be the perfect site. The settlement was chosen because it was one of the many rural settlements in Namibia facing extreme rates of poverty. This was mainly due to the fact that it started as a “wild” squatter settlement in 1992, set up by people who had no other place to go. Most of the then around 400 inhabitants came from nearby farms they were forced to leave. The so-called “Omaheke evictions” led to the occupation of nearby state-owned land next to the Otjivero dam. The settlement had nothing to offer but water. There was no work, no income from agricultural activities or animal husbandry since they did not own the land, no public transport, no electricity nor any schools or health care facilities. Despite all these adverse facts people managed to survive, which was mostly due to their informal social security system. It obliges those who are capable of giving to give and entitles those in need to ask for help (see below). Surviving mainly on old age pensions and remittances from relatives, the general situation was quite destitute. “We were

² Sponsored by Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung Köln.

³ See http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/namibia_statistics.html

on the ground” (Afrikaans: *Ons was op die grond*) is how people would describe their life when asked to talk about these years. In 2002 Otjivero became known nationwide when its inhabitants went to court and were conceded the right to stay. Until today the land is neither communally nor privately owned but released for utilization, as the state court recognized a national responsibility towards Namibian citizens who have nowhere to stay. Since then a school and a clinic have been built, there is a post office as well as electricity and sanitation facilities. The overall socio-economic factors, however, continued to be wretched, as there was not enough income to be generated in the area. When BIG started, 86% of the population lived below the national minimum standard of life (cost of basic needs index), 75% of all households did not have enough food and 42% of all children were found to be malnourished.⁴ In January 2008 the first grants were paid out.

3. Purposes , hopes and arguments

The main purpose of BIG was to improve the general living conditions in Otjivero and thereby show that a basic income grant does make a difference to the life of individual beneficiaries. The Otjivero project was intended as a first step towards a basic income grant for all Namibians. Arguments in favour of BIG have been that a basic income grant

- reduces overall poverty, malnutrition of children, school drop-out rates, and poverty-related crime;
- improves health condition and strengthens government’s efforts to provide medication against AIDS (ARV = antiretroviral drugs);
- fosters economic growth;
- reduces individual and household debts;
- empowers people to engage in income-generating activities;
- has positive effects on gender equality.

To prove what effects BIG exactly had, the project was closely monitored from the start. Today, BIG is one of the best documented and promoted socio-economic projects in Namibia. Books have been published about it, reports were submitted, and talks organized to inform the public.⁵ Research conducted in Otjivero, where the BIG project was implemented in 2007, has been carefully executed under the guidance of well-known social scientists from international institutions. Within the first two years, approx. 50 households were surveyed, school and hospital records examined and criminal statistics checked. All the facts regarding the current social and economic situation are therefore known. They have convincingly proven that for a poor community such as Otjivero, any extra income does make a difference no matter what people choose to use it for. Even though the grant is not much even for Namibian standards of living, it might increase the income of individuals and households significantly, especially for the lower income groups. This is also true after the monthly grant of 100 N\$ per person had to be reduced to 80 N\$ as a bridging allowance when the project had

⁴ Haarmann et al. 2009: 47-54.

⁵ See the publications on BIG by the Basic Income Grant Coalition 2008 and 2009. Newspaper articles have been regularly published since 2007 by Allgemeine Zeitung, New Era, The Namibian and other Namibian newspapers.

officially ended in 2009. The amount of 80 N\$ is now guaranteed until March 2012 or until other solutions have been found.⁶

Bearing in mind the fact that households are usually large, and every single member is entitled to those 100 (80) N\$ – except for those who are already beneficiaries of state allowances –, a household of 10 persons thus receives 1,000 (800) N\$ per month. Payments to children below the age of 18 are collected by their official carer, e.g. the mother, father, grandmother or an elder sibling. This amounts to the monthly wage of an experienced male farm worker in the Omaheke region and is twice the income of most female farm workers in the same area. 1,000 N\$ is not sufficient to properly feed a large family of 10, but it helps them to survive on maize meal, tea and sugar. Grossed up to the village earnings, BIG increases the communal income by quite substantial numbers: Calculated for all the 930 beneficiaries who were eventually registered, there is then an extra income of about 95,000 N\$ (75,000 N\$) per month, most of which is spent immediately within the village or a nearby farm store, in Windhoek or in Gobabis, the regional capital.

The main aim of BIG is to reduce poverty on a permanent level. The initiators hope that these amounts will empower people to improve their general living conditions, and also use their extra finance as a sort of initial stimulus for future income-generating activities. The results show that some of the intentions which were articulated when BIG started could indeed be realized: The percentage of households below the food poverty line decreased from 76% to 37% within one year, the percentage of underweight children from 43% to 17%, school drop-out rates were reduced significantly and health conditions improved.⁷

Nevertheless, ever since the project started, discussions about the output of BIG have never ceased, fuelled further by public talks and media news of economists who have visited Otjivero in order to examine the observable achievements.⁸

Arguments against BIG were based mainly on three points:

- The national budget does not allow the grant of a monthly basic income to all the 1.2 million or so Namibian citizens who would eventually be eligible.
- A monthly allowance which is granted unconditionally to all might hinder the economic initiative of the individual beneficiary rather than enhance it – or, in other words: BIG makes people lazy.
- BIG might therefore even prove to be counterproductive, and in no way does it guarantee a sustainable economic development.

Both sides, with arguments in favour as well as against BIG, found strong support on national and international levels. By now, there are support groups not only in Germany, which provides most of the sponsorship, but also in many other countries. There are BIG initiatives in South Africa as well as in Brazil and India to promote own projects of a national basic income.⁹ BIG seems to have become

⁶ See <http://www.az.com.na/lokales/aufwurf-an-nation-rettet-otjivero.143951.php>

⁷ See Harmann et al. 2009: 15.

⁸ See Osterkamp, Rigmar: BIG in Namibia – ein ernüchterndes Kapitel deutscher Entwicklungshilfe. In: Allgemeine Zeitung Windhoek, 13.12.2011.

⁹ See Motte, Jochen et al. (eds.) 2010: Think BIG: inputs and reflections on social justice and the basic income grant. Hannover: Foedus-Verlag; Natrass, Nicoli / Seekings, Jeremy 2005: The political economy of the basic income grant in South Africa. In: Widerquist, Karl (ed.): The ethics and economics of the basic income guarantee. Aldershot: Ashgate, S. 235-248; Standing, Guy / Samson, Michael 2003: A basic income grant for South Africa. Lansdowne: University of Cape Town

part of a global social ideology revolving around welfare, justice and redistribution. This modifies the somehow gridlocked Namibian debate, giving it a broader perspective by making clear that other countries have similar problems. At the same time, it complicates issues in Namibia because of the many actors on the scene with diverse ideological, political or economic interests, with varying personal experiences and different cultural backgrounds.

4. Actors and institutions

There are in fact numerous actors on the scene due to the overall attention BIG has evoked. When BIG started, the organizers did not expect it to develop into a project of global concern and media attention. What could have been a national project based on a national plan of social welfare became an international and multicultural endeavour: Soon after NAMTEX promoted the idea of a basic income grant, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Namibia (ELCRN) took up the suggestion and strongly supported it, as it promises to promulgate the Christian principles of equality, solidarity and fraternity. The Bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, Dr. Zephania Kameeta, made BIG a matter of personal concern. However, neither the Namibian government, dominated by SWAPO for many years, nor the Namibian Parliament are unanimous in this case. When it became clear that the envisaged basic income grant could not soon be realized on a national level as a state-operated transfer benefit, the Otjivero pilot project was agreed upon to test the possibilities as well as the medium-term consequences. The project was then designed under the guidance of two German pastors who happened to be working at the ELCRN headquarters at the time. Owing to their good connections to the German Rheinisch Church and to the United Evangelical Mission in Germany from where they had been sent, it was possible to collect donations with the help of various support groups. Private sponsors and political foundations joined in so that the project was able to start with the financial assets necessary to run for an initial period of two years. Within Namibia, BIG has been backed up by a broad coalition of civil institutions – the BIG Coalition. Among its members are the Council of Churches (CCN), the umbrella organization of Namibian trade unions (NUNW)¹⁰, the Namibian Non-Governmental Organizations Forum (NANGOF) and the Namibian Network of AIDS Service Organizations (NANASO), the National Youth Service (NYC), the Church Alliance for Orphans (CAFO), the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) and the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI).¹¹ The Desk for Social Development (DfSD) of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church is the legal administrative institution responsible for the implementation of BIG.

BIG soon attracted students and scientists from all parts of the world and from diverse disciplines, mostly of the social and political sciences.¹² In addition, sponsors as well as BIG initiators from other countries, politicians, church officials and journalists have all come, pouring in a constant flow to the place where it all began. Otjivero at times turns into an open stage where different actors show their

Press; Suplici, Eduardo Matarazzo 2003: Legitimizing Basic Income in Development countries: Brazil, or: “The answer is blowing in the wind”. In: *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, Vol. 25, No. 3, S. 407-424.

¹⁰ In 2010 the trade unions temporarily left the coalition due to internal disputes among the members of the NUNW executive committee. Since 2011, NUNW is again a member of the BIG Coalition.

¹¹ For more details see www.bignam.org.

¹² See e.g. Bardowell, Nadalie 2012: *Exploring the Influence of Prevailing Perceptions of Poverty in Social Policy Reform: The Case of the BIG Pilot Project in Namibia*. York/Canada: University of York. Unpubl. MA thesis.

performances. As opposed to the fears of some of the initiators, Otjiverans never seem to become fatigued by this amount of attention or appear run down by all the foreign spectators. On the contrary, visitors provide some change in everyday routine and might even become a cause of sensation. Otjiverans do sometimes wonder why people from countries as far away as Germany, Canada or Brazil would be willing to visit a remote place such as theirs, but they know that this kind of social attraction might help to promote and prolong the project – which in fact it did. Deeply aware of the advantages of reciprocal giving and sharing as the Otjiverans are, any visitor is warmly welcomed and proudly shown the village.

All of these actors brought with them their own interests and emotions, political ambitions and ideological goals, which helped to keep BIG in public discourse but also added to the general confusion. BIG in Namibia has become a contested issue, and there is more at stake than a billion dollar project.

5. The political debate

BIG in Namibia initiated intensive debate and public discourse held in political meetings, church congregations, public talks and the media. It is mainly the newspapers that provide information on the aims of the project and keep the public up to date. Namibians are generally well informed about what goes on in the country, and even in squatter settlements newspapers are frequently read if available. News also spread by word of mouth across the regions so that even in remote areas people do know what BIG is all about. However, as not all Namibians have access to newspapers and information on the subject is rather scarce on radio and television, few are fully aware of the pros and cons of an unconditionally granted basic income grant. When asked about the details, most do not know that it was mainly for practical reasons that an *unconditional* allowance was recommended in the first place. Lacking this information, most people would strongly support the idea of an allowance to help those in need but would find it totally *unfair* to include those who do not need extra help. There is considerable antagonism against the waiving of means-testing, i.e. allowing BIG to be provided without any criteria of social or economic need. The church, as the institution with the best infrastructure in the country, would be able to inform its members about these concepts and would have the means to promote BIG on a broader scale, but BIG is contested even among pastors and church elders.

As the president of state and the prime minister have both opted out of the project, among other things for precisely these reasons, the country is rather divided when it comes to the question of whether BIG should be continued and possibly expanded or yield to other forms of state welfare programs. It might have been convenient if the organizers had carried out a survey well in advance of the implementation of BIG, but it is doubtful whether the results would have changed the debates. Long before the actors had come to grips with the many details which needed to be tackled, the political discussions about BIG had turned into an *ideological debate* with many more facets than just the unresolved problem of social justice and equality in Namibia. On closer examination, several open conflict lines emerge (Fig. 1).

First of all, there are two *economic concepts* which are opposed to each other, one of which is the long-standing Western model of the economizing individual (*homo oeconomicus*) claiming that each and every individual will always try to maximize personal profits to satisfy his/her potentially endless needs, given the fact that the means to do so are limited. Accordingly, it is the *individual* that needs incentives to encourage *economic activities* which will have long-term social benefits for the society at large. This is basically the position of the sceptical economists commenting on the outcome of BIG, but also of parts of the Namibian government claiming that BIG is not big enough to be a substantial contribution for individual initiatives. Opposed to this is the concept of moral economy which regards economy as being embedded in society. To enhance the overall wellbeing it needs redistribution mechanisms in *society* and not just on the individual level. ELCRN is very much in favour of this model since it seems to match well with Christian principles of responsibility and human dignity.

Second, there are two opposing *political concepts*, one of which that sees the state as the dominant political entity whose representatives should primarily be responsible for asserting its unity, independence and economic wellbeing – which may not necessarily include the welfare of all members and parts of society. Opposed to this stands the concept of the democratic social welfare state on whose behalf revenues are distributed to guarantee social stability. Part of the problem with BIG is indeed the unsolved question whether it should in general be the responsibility of the nation state to guarantee a basic income to all its citizens or whether this should be left to the responsibility of the individual.

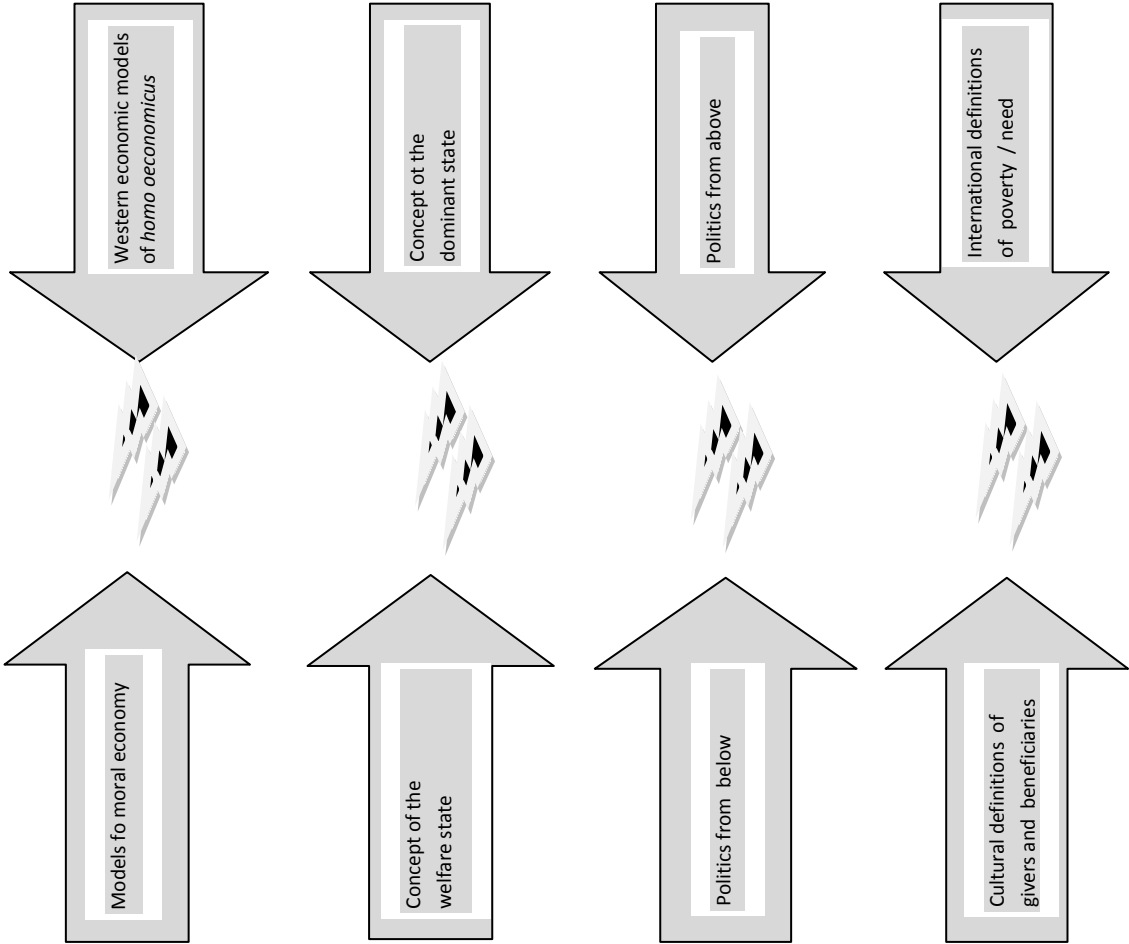


Fig. 1: Contested concepts in the debate on BIG

Third, diverse *concepts of power* play a role. Namibian politicians have specific ideas of what political power is and should comprise, possibly due to their own cultural backgrounds. The head of state, prime minister, and any person in high office or member of government are conceptualized as leading persons in a hierarchically structured society. Political leaders do not regard themselves as the first among equals (*primus inter pares*) as many of the Khoisan groups do, nor as the first servants of the state. They believe that leaders should lead and must know what is good for the country as well as for its citizens, how state revenues should be distributed and laws passed. Governmental actions reflect this kind of politics from above, which might be heavily disputed in public but are rarely cancelled and even less revoked. This kind of political culture puts heavy pressure and responsibility on individual politicians. The least they expect is loyalty and obedience to the law, the gratitude of citizens and admiration for personal achievements. The confrontation with a concept of politics from below, with individuals and institutions of civil society presenting new ideas which have not been elaborated by government, must then be construed as a challenge to those in power even if this was not intended by the initiators in the first place.

Last but not least, the national and *international concepts of poverty and poverty reduction* must be mentioned. What is debatable is less the definitions but the changes that are to be achieved. A hungry person remains hungry no matter how we define hunger, but it is worth considering what kind of changes should be aimed for. This would lead to the question of how a basic income can be appropriated and spent. However, none of the many publications has so far mentioned this fact since it seemed all too clear what was good for the people and how they should act. Not all of them acted predictably. “Not behaving appropriately” was one of the criticisms arising in the initial phase of BIG, which shows that there are different ways of understanding how BIG could be spent and what it should be used for. But how could anybody possibly know, if BIG was never discussed from a cultural perspective? Indigenous concepts of poverty and need were not investigated beforehand and neither were specific concepts of personhood or cultural meanings of a “good life” taken into account.

More aspects have been mentioned in public debates, such as the personal interests and political ambitions of the initiators.¹³ But this is mere speculation and in any case irrelevant for the concept of BIG and its implementation as an instrument of social security and redistribution.

6. Socio-economic conditions and cultural implications

To take into account the diverse cultural backgrounds of Namibians is not easy as the majority of all the Namibian communities are now multiethnic settlements, with people of many cultures living together, working together and marrying each other, with a variety of life styles and intercultural affiliations. This is true for Otjivero as well as for neighbouring Witvlei, situated approx. 60 km from Otjivero. In both settlements most of the inhabitants are of Damara descent, but there are also Ovambo, Herero, Kavango, a few Himba and many more inhabitants of mixed descent. For reasons of simplicity, the anthropological enquiry focused on Damara culture, i.e. choosing interviewees with a Damara background either by descent or cultural influence. The Damara are part of the Khoisan peoples of Southern Africa (Khoekhoe and San) who share common culture traits such as language, social structure, and political organization.

¹³ See Osterkamp, cited above.

It is important to mention that there are almost no job opportunities in Otjivero-Omitara. The settlement, situated in the Omaheke area east of Windhoek, is scarcely populated, none of the inhabitants of Otjivero owns the land on which he or she is settled and scarcely anybody possesses animals outside the area. The few jobs available for teachers, nurses, post office employees and police officers are all held by persons from outside the settlement. Some of the Omaheke farmers – most of them of German descent – offer jobs to farm workers but, because of the preceding farm evictions which caused enormous disputes in the past 20 years, most Otjiverans today prefer to keep away from adjacent farms. In the former “location” of Witvlei, the financial condition of poor households is similar to that of Otjivero, but the overall economic setting of the place is slightly better due to the number of jobs available: The largest employer is the local abattoir which offers about 150 jobs at a time, many of them held by Witvleians from the location. There are a few other income opportunities provided by the municipality, the bakery, a tannery, fuel station, post office, school, hospital and the cattle auction. Many inhabitants of Witvlei also own a few animals, mostly donkeys and goats, and rent grazing rights on communal pastures outside the settlement. Compared to the size of the town, however, there are not enough jobs available for the 3,000 inhabitants. Approx. 60% of them, about 2,000 persons, today live in the location, many of them without a regular income. They therefore have to draw heavily on other security mechanisms in order to survive, just as most Otjiverans do and had to do even more so before the implementation of BIG.

In Otjivero there was a large population influx from other parts of the country immediately after BIG began so that the settlement increased by almost 30% to approx. 1,500 inhabitants in 2011 within the first year of BIG allowances. Among the newcomers were many Ovambo but mostly Damara who chose to stay with their Otjivero relatives. In spite of not being admitted to BIG once the project had started they nevertheless decided to stay for the time being, thus creating some headaches for the first investigators who expected the beneficiary households to grow in economic terms rather than in size. What has not been addressed is why members of the extended family were so openly accepted, even though that reduced the effects of BIG as more and more people had to be fed. At the same time, the steady flow of bank remittances was found to decline which further diminished the income of individuals and households. An increase in economic initiatives such as retailing, brick-making and the manufacture of clothes was indeed found to have been stimulated by BIG cash transfers and growing buying power, but there had been local entrepreneurs before BIG. Debts to the local store owners could be reduced but in no way has the practice of entering into debt ceased, and savings were found to be minimal and not always meant to be used for economic activities. In addition, a large part of the monthly income was found to be given away in the form of gifts or contributions to social activities (not mentioned in former reports), which again reduced the chances for individual progress.

So what stands behind a behaviour pattern which favours social activities over market participation? One of the main characteristics of Damara culture is the elaborate *exchange system*. It obliges its members to give as long as they have anything to give, and authorizes each and everyone to ask for help whenever needed. Even though it is mostly food that is requested, other items such as services, money, tools or donkey carts and even persons may be demanded. In most houses and certainly so in poor households, there is a constant flow of visitors asking for a plate of food, a cup of sugar or maize meal, a bit of soap, wood, or money to reload the cell phone, transport opportunities or contributions to forthcoming funerals and weddings. Whenever there is an elderly person found alone in the house, a youngster might be asked to stay and help, and households that become unable

to feed their members may send some of the children to an aunt, an uncle, grandmother or neighbour to stay there for a while. The oldest person in the family as the *guardian of the fire* has special responsibilities towards the members of the extended family and would never refuse a place to stay or food to share if demanded. Some even voluntarily offer help if a member of the family (including those who married in) is found to be in need.

The exchange system is connected to a *value system* which favours the *giving* over the *keeping*. Those with the highest social reputation in the community and within the extended families are usually those who are said to care well for others rather than accumulating individual wealth. It might come to the point that some persons give away freely, only to demand the same items back the next day. To go and “ask” is thus nothing to be ashamed of but, on the contrary, keeps social relations alive and offers the giver a chance to be a *good person*. Even without an obvious need people would adhere to the rules of giving and sharing. This is not to say that material wellbeing is not appreciated, but that it is less validated over the social image. Persons who do receive good incomes and have the opportunity for material prosperity normally accept a certain amount of extra expense if requested as well as relatives in the house who must be cared for. However, certain strategies are necessary in order to live within this system and prevent oneself being exploited on the one hand or become too demanding on the other.

Damara prefer to “give” on a reciprocal basis rather than to lend on fixed terms or to be paid for something that was given. The word “*au*” (not existent in the English language) implies a long-term option of return and creates a lasting relationship which is almost impossible in market exchanges, which are characterized by sales and purchases, wages and profits. Wages are paid in direct exchange for work, and commodities bought in stores must be paid for in cash or at least – if bought on credit – in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, people will still try to establish a relationship between the giver and the receiver (becoming indebted to store owners is part of that process; store owners who grant individual loans or sell on credit basically do the same, at least on the basis of balanced reciprocity). Goods which are bought – whether in cash or on credit – might immediately be given to another person and thus transformed into a gift. It is therefore the giver who must set a limit to prevent exploitation, not the recipient.

The explanation why people give so freely and willingly accept heavy burdens by all the social obligations they have to fulfil can be found in religious beliefs. For the Damara as for other Christian Khoisan, the LORD is conceived of as the ultimate giver of life and all worldly goods. However, they are convinced that HE demands something in return, which can only be given via a third person. If we look at the structure of exchange relations we find a three-way deal (see Fig. 2): Anything given to another person ($A > B > C > D$) does help those in need and establishes a relationship, but it is also intended as a counter-gift of gratitude directed to GOD. On the long run it all pays off because the LORD is good. The Damara are convinced that the LORD will always care for the needy and keep the system going. This explains why there is a continuous exchange between individuals as well as households and people are eager to “give” if they are able to, since it places them in a much better social and emotional position than any economic asset would do. Accordingly, BIG is also understood in this way – sent by the LORD through the initiative of others.

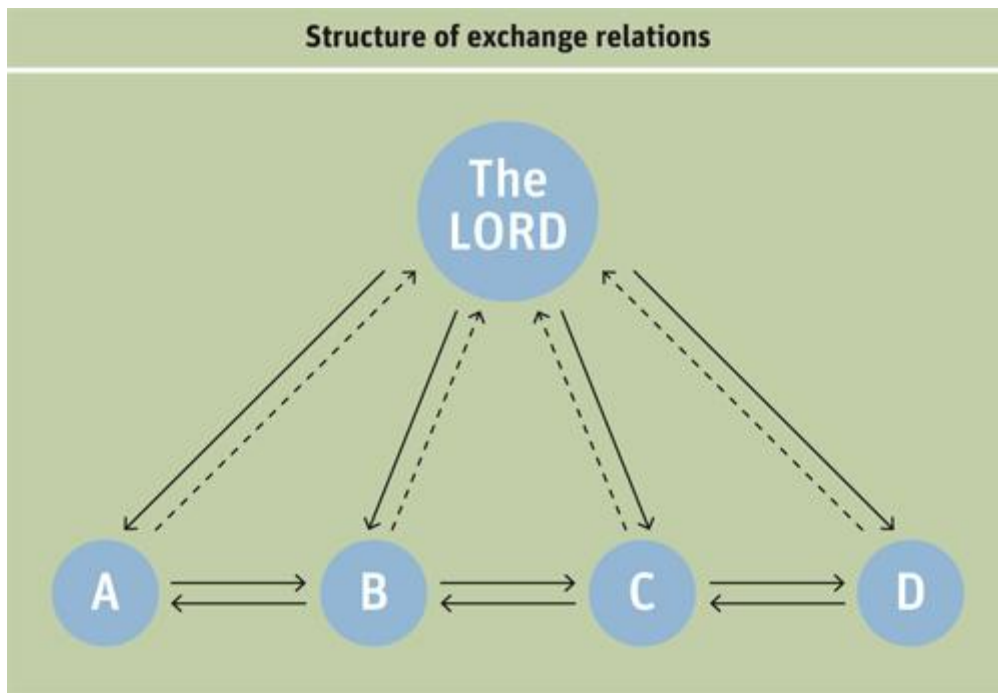


Fig. 2: Structure of exchange relations

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For the Damara as for other Khoisan peoples where this exchange system has been well documented¹⁴, it is much more than a socio-economic mechanism to reduce the risks of life. It must rather be conceived of as a culturally approved *organizing principal* providing security and guidance, identity and belonging. One should, however, be careful not to romanticize it. It puts heavy pressure on the individual and might even hinder personal career aspirations, since those who possess only little must give and share all the time. It demands submission to the norms of sharing and keeps families as well as whole communities on a very low economic level if there is nothing but poverty to be distributed. In poor communities, no one within the community of families and neighbours will have the chance to prosper unless he or she leaves the place and cuts all social ties. Because there is always somebody in need, people have no excuse *not* to give. On the other hand, those without the chance to ever reciprocate are at risk of dropping out of the system and being thrown on their own meagre resources. Under the present circumstances, people will only be able to survive if they are participants in the exchange system, so whenever they have a chance they will resume their obligations and possibly expand their social networks.

Before BIG was introduced in Otjivero, the overall poverty led to excessive demand-sharing. By heavily drawing on the existing exchange relations, Otjivero managed to survive, and it will continue to survive if BIG should cease, but only by accepting the wretched conditions of pre-BIG times. A wealthy country such as Namibia should not have to tolerate this. Unless other sources of income are created, BIG is urgently needed and does make a difference – but used in a way which was not anticipated by the initiators of BIG.

¹⁴ For the San groups see Wiessner, Pauline Wilson 1982: Risk, reciprocity and social influences on !Kung San economics. In: Leacock, Eleanor and Richard Lee (eds.): Politics and history in band societies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.; for the Nama see Klocke-Daffa, Sabine 2001: "Wenn du hast, mußt du geben". Soziale Sicherheit im Ritus und im Alltag bei den Nama von Berseba/Namibia. Münster: Lit-Verlag.

7. Otjivero and Witvlei: To have or not to have BIG

Methods of enquiry

Based on intensive research into exchange systems and social security among the Namibian Khoisan and drawing on the already existing literature on BIG, a quantitative enquiry was carried out between 14 September and 14 October 2011, i.e. between two payouts of BIG. These were supplemented by qualitative interviews. In order to compare the effects of BIG in Otjivero with a similarly structured community not receiving BIG, an additional enquiry was conducted in Witvlei. For reasons of comparison, the participant households had to fulfil a number of criteria:

- no regular monthly income from wages or salaries,
- large size (no single households),
- members of the extended family in the house,
- being “poor” according to *indigenous* classifications,
- most of the household members of Damara descent.

With the help of several persons in both settlements (from church committees as well as town councils) who knew the people of their community, a list was set up. After the questionnaire had been presented to them, around 30 households eventually volunteered to participate (n=29; Otjivero 14; Witvlei 15). The number of people living in these 29 households varied between 349 and 366 (356 on average). The person interviewed each day was generally the head of the household or somebody acting on his/her behalf.

The questionnaire

Identical questions were asked of participants in both settlements over a period of a month (n=23 days, Mo-Fr). Weekends were left out to give interviewees as well as interviewers some rest. This also prevented the overlapping of appointments, since many church and other social events usually take place on Saturdays and Sundays. The questionnaire was revised several times after intensive discussions with participants in the run-up to the enquiry to make sure that the questions were comprehensible. The questionnaire consisted of two sets with 10 questions each, concerning income and expenditure behaviour. As the system of exchanges was already well known to the investigator, cultural norms were taken into consideration by asking how much was received/given as a *reciprocal gift* (in Kkoekhoe language: *au*), how much was *lent/given back*, how much was *taken in/given out in cash* and what *extra income/expenditure* was worth mentioning. It proved impossible to calculate the exact monetary value of each transaction. Answers such as “I gave half a cup of sugar” or “I received a plate of cooked food” (in Afrikaans: *bordkos*) or “I borrowed a basket” could not be adequately measured. Therefore, only the *daily number of transfers* was investigated. They allow a general impression of economic and social transfers within the research sample but do not depict the absolute size and quality. Since visitors come and go, family members from adjacent households frequently join in for meals and children from the neighbourhood are given food, drinks or sweets whenever there is something in the house, these routine transfers could often not be recorded. The numbers thus refer to the answers given concerning the memorized transfers over the past 24 hours.

Results

In total, 700 formal interviews were carried out, generating about 5,000 data which were later evaluated and visualized in diagrams (see below). In addition to that, around 45 qualitative guideline-based interviews were conducted supporting the interpretation of quantitative data.

Regarding the classification of all transfers, it is obvious that *giving* with a long-term option to reciprocate constitutes an important part of all transactions, whether in income or expenditure (see Figs. 3 + 4). In both settlements, there is a much higher number of expenditure transfers given by reciprocal gifts rather than by loans, selling/buying or extras. What is significant is the fact that Otjivero shows a much higher ratio in this unit than does Witvlei, whereas incoming transfers are almost similar.

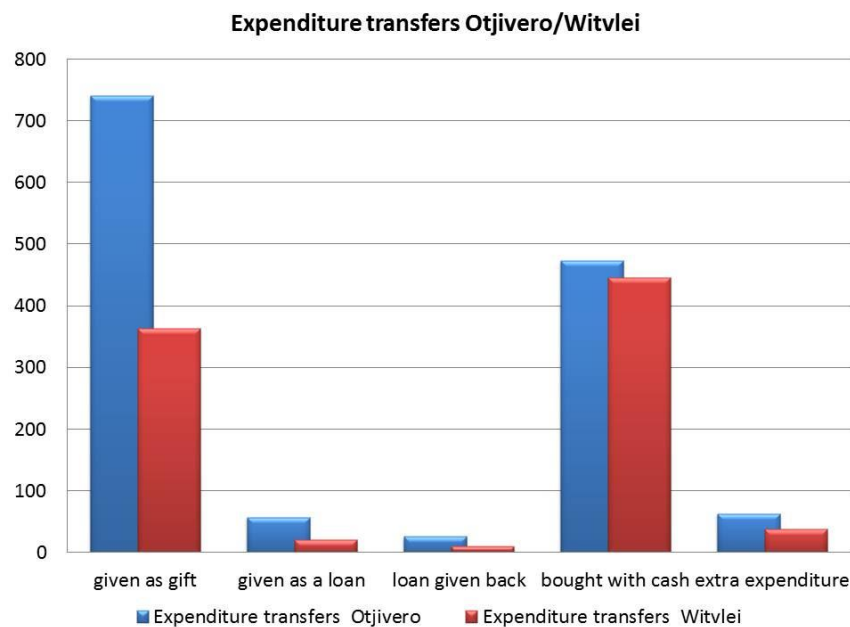


Fig. 3: Total expenditure by classification of transfers in Otjivero and Witvlei.

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In Witvlei, the higher number of sales is striking (see Fig. 4). This is due to the fact that many people sell water to neighbours whose water taps have been cut off (and collect money at the end of the month), or sell fire wood as many Witvleians can temporarily not afford electricity. In both cases, the rather low number of loans, i.e. items or money lent to other persons, proves what interviewees stated in qualitative interviews: “Don’t lend out because you always run after the things.” It is then much better to give a gift in the first place and come back to this in case of emergency, because a gift creates an open bill. The fact that in Witvlei the figures for incoming gifts are almost as significant as in Otjivero is due to the practice of the local abattoir to freely distribute leftovers such as intestines. These are very much appreciated by the households of the Witvlei location, using them for their own meals as well as for gifts and (in a few cases) for the sale of boiled-out fat.

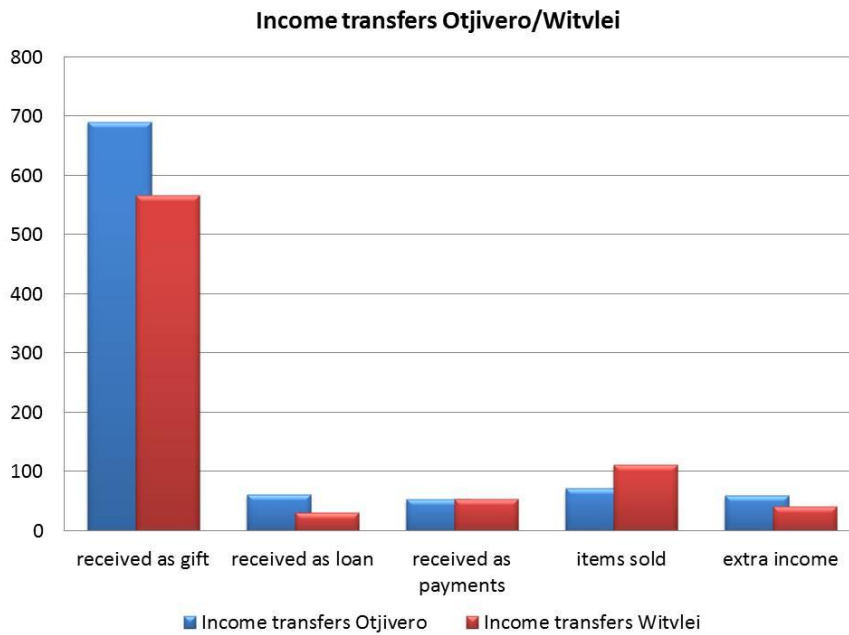


Fig. 4: Total Income by classification of transfers in Otjivero and Witvlei.

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Almost half of all transfers are thus comprised of gifts. This does not mean that the total monetary value of gifts given to others exceeds the income but stresses the great importance of social relationships. All interviewees pointed to the fact that they always had many visitors in their houses, who in most cases would ask for food, money or other items (between 8 and 10 times per day). The information is verified by the quantitative data of the investigation. These facts should be taken into account in any social welfare program as in any job- and income-generating program, since it signifies that any income will in part be distributed to others rather than benefit only the recipients.

Cash income from sales, salaries and wages or BIG and other social welfare programs thus forms only part of a culture-specific income pattern. Gift income is considered just as important and in fact might even be the most essential component for poor households, but even they would not withhold their resources. On average, about half of all expenditure transfers affected gift donations (see Fig. 5).

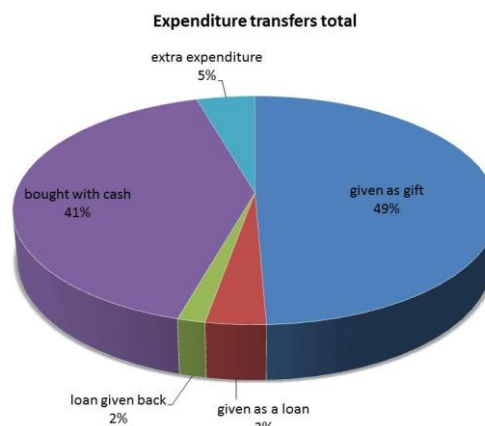
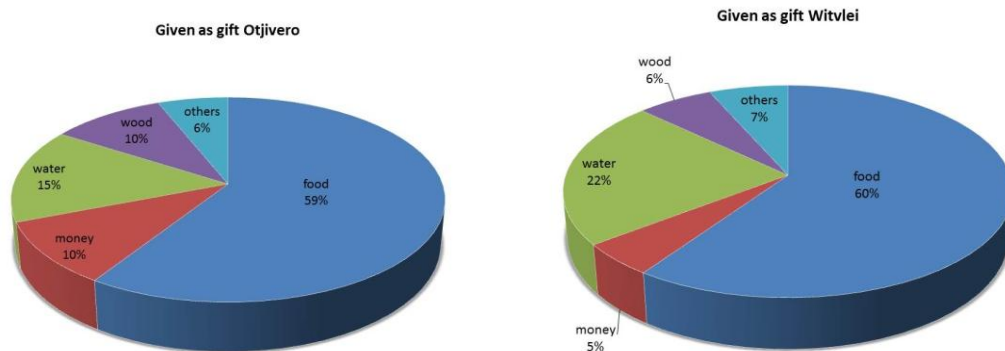


Fig. 5: Total expenditure by classification of transfers in Otjivero and Witvlei.

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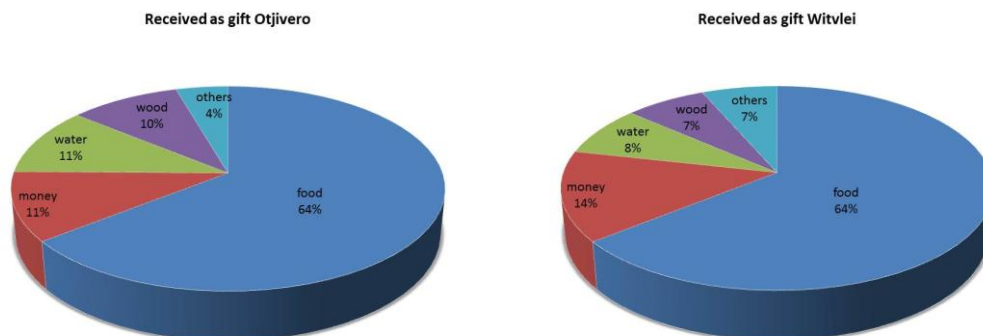
Considering the fact that the surveyed households in both settlements were poor according to local standards of living, it was not astonishing to find that almost 60% of all transfers which were *given as gifts* related to food. This applies to Otjivero as well as Witvlei (see Figs. 6 + 7).



Figs. 6 + 7: Percentage of expense transfers given as reciprocal gifts, by classified items, Otjivero and Witvlei.

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Juxtaposed with the amount of transfers relating to *incoming gifts* the diagrams show the same pattern i.e. that a high percentage of all income transfers are also received in food. This could have been expected for Witvlei where there is no BIG or any other regular income available, so that many households rely on gifts from other persons. Interestingly enough, we find the same for Otjiverans even though they have BIG which should reduce the number of incoming daily gifts, since beneficiaries no longer rely on them for subsistence (see Figs. 8 + 9).



Figs. 8 + 9: Percentage of income transfers given as reciprocal gifts, by classified items, Otjivero and Witvlei.

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Taking into account the total amount of all transfers in both settlements, it can be shown that expenditure transfers have been consistently higher than income transfers (see Fig. 10). It must be borne in mind that these figures do not reveal the *monetary value* of transfers, so it might therefore well be that the expenses do not exceed the financial income. In general, people do not live beyond their means, but most of all the interviewees in fact reported that they were in debt to local stores. The practice of making debts is not always due to poverty. Many persons prefer to buy on credit as a means of bridging temporary financial difficulties or postponing their expenses for groceries in favour

of other financial obligations. As bank loans are not available to people without a regular job income, this offers a way to financial liquidity otherwise not accessible, even though interest rates sometimes (but not always) are outrageous. Most people prefer to buy at the same store for years maintaining a good relationship with the owner. In contrast to their bad reputation in Namibia, *shebeen* owners take up the same position since most of them sell not only alcohol but also groceries, clothes or kitchen items and grant extra loans to their customers. To maintain good social relations they also participate in the general exchange system by contributing money and goods or offering transport whenever there is a social event such as baptisms, confirmations/communions, weddings or funerals.

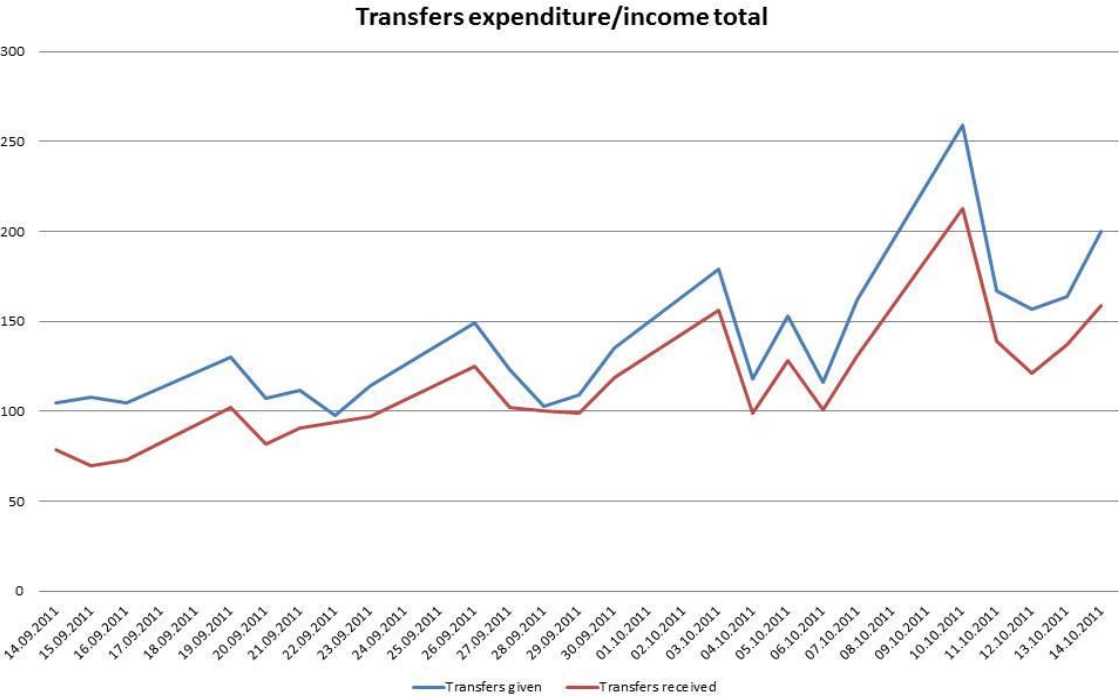


Fig. 10: Total transfers in Otjivero and Witvlei.

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The monetary resources people have at their disposal are extremely small. For most days of the month they have less than 3 N\$ to spend (see Fig. 11). As store owners and private brokers demand the punctual return of their money (some of them even accompanying their clients to the bank or post office on paydays to make sure they receive their money back), there is not much left to save and withhold for investment purposes. Even where there is, some people again prefer to save up their money for social purposes: About 5% of all BIG beneficiaries in Otjivero (n=48) took out a *funeral insurance* with Old Mutual Insurance Company at 9.99 N\$ per month. In case of the death of the policy owner, 2,500 N\$ will be paid out to the family of the deceased¹⁵, thus enabling them to hold a decent funeral according to cultural norms.

¹⁵ Numbers given by Old Mutual Insurance Company for Otjivero, 19.10.2011.

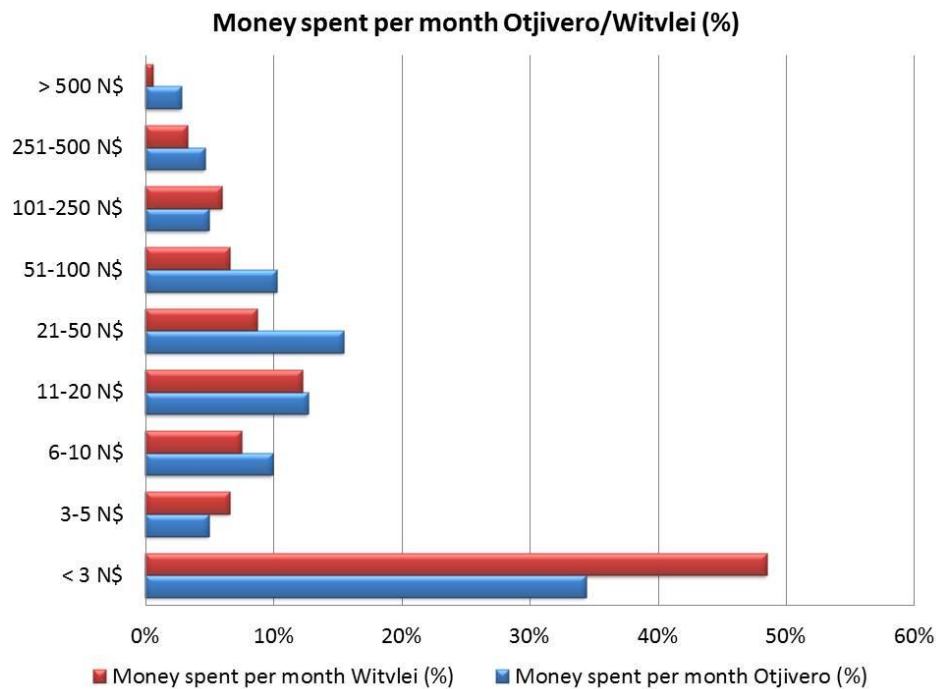


Fig. 11: Money available per day of the month in Otjivero and Witvlei
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Due to BIG there is more money available in Otjivero, that can be spent, especially when it comes to larger sums above 50 N\$, whereas in Witvlei people have to manage with extremely small amounts of cash of less than 5 N\$ per day for most days of the month. Under these circumstances it is extremely difficult to hold money back for individual needs. The most reasonable way to cope is to spend it immediately after it comes in or invest it in long-lasting assets such as animals. To postpone expenses or keep savings aside always bears the risk of rearrangement as unforeseen social obligations might arise.

From the point of social security, to have or not to have BIG is most significant for poor households. BIG can be a way out of poverty and destitution, even though it might not be the only possibility. The mere effect of increased buying power does stimulate the local economy to a considerable degree and on a continuous basis, since most of the money is spent on consumption goods immediately after it is received. It should be noted, however, that BIG is appropriated and used in very much the same way as other means of income and always *according to cultural norms*. This is not to say that there are no economic initiatives to be found in Otjivero. People do save some of the money if they can, or contribute to private credit associations in order to buy high-priced consumer goods such as TVs, refrigerators or stoves. But for the Damara population it makes sense to invest BIG first and foremost as *social capital* rather than to regard BIG primarily as an economic asset and an incentive to income-generating activities. As their traditional exchange system is the most important security mechanism, to invest into *social networks* by maintaining gift donations is much more *sustainable* than any economic endeavour could be. Individuals and households will fall back on these networks in times of need.

8. What difference it makes

BIG makes a difference in many ways:

- It reduces poverty by securing a regular income to satisfy basic needs.
- It reduces malnutrition as it is spent mostly on food.
- It increases the buying power of the population, thus boosting local markets.
- It is a means of redistribution of national revenue and resources.
- It substitutes or complements income options.
- It increases social dynamics.
- It is sustainable because of its security-generating effects.

Due to the specific utilization of BIG, an enormous social dynamism can be observed in Otjivero. Those who have been chronic recipients of gifts are now in a position to care for their own needs *and* give to others, thus gaining social reputation and strengthening their social relationships within and outside the settlement. In most cases, this was achieved by generous giving, contributions to social events, accepting incoming visitors as well as visiting outside relatives, trying to buy their own animals and helping others to do so, or contributing to funeral insurances. The most important factor is that visiting relatives are freely accepted into the household, some of them for a non-specified period of time. Offering a place to stay and caring for children as well as adults is part of the gift exchange and highly appreciated by members of any particular social network (see Fig. 12).

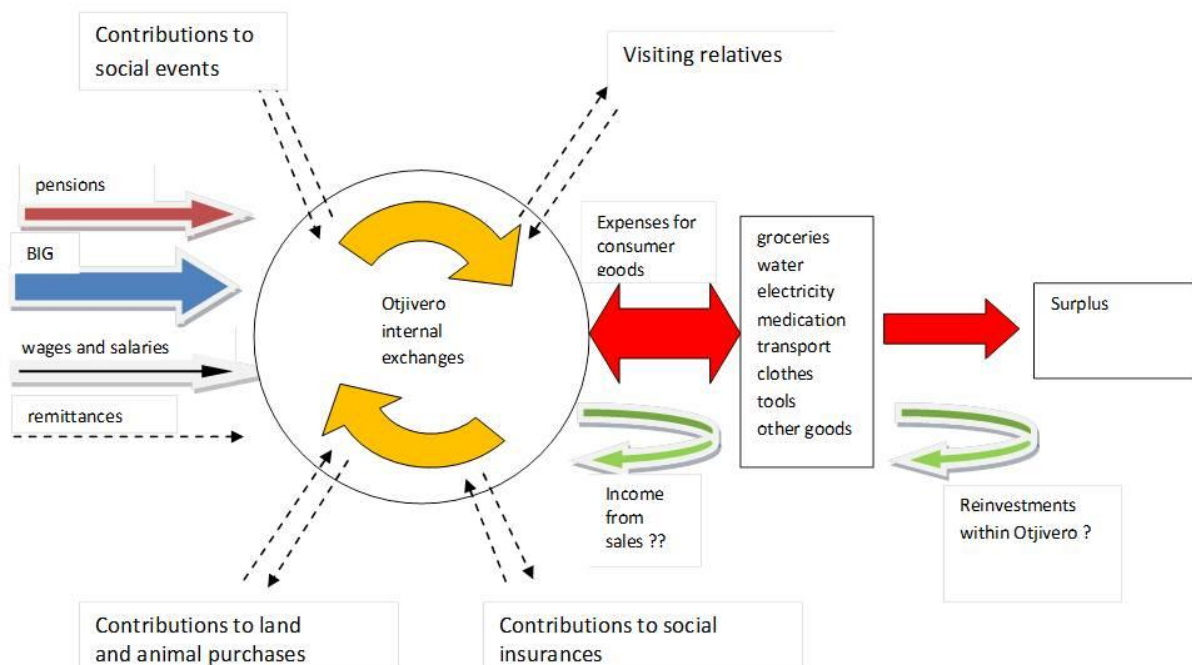


Fig. 12: The impact of BIG on exchange relations in Otjivero

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The *dignity* gained by a basic income grant results *not* from the fact that beneficiaries no longer need to ask for help (because this is not considered to be dishonourable in the first place), but that they again become participants in the system as givers and recipients. It is this kind of enhancement of social dynamics that constitutes the *sustainability* of BIG.

This seems to be all that can be expected of a basic income grant. Since most of the money is spent on consumer goods, BIG (and/or other regular income) increases the buying power of the population and supports local enterprises. However, there is not enough left to boost local production, thus allowing extra income from sales, and the surpluses are not locally reinvested. To achieve this additional improvement, more would be necessary than just a minimum income.

9. Is BIG big enough?

A grant of 100 or 80 N\$ per month and person is not an income Namibians would be able to make a living from. However, this was not its purpose. BIG was intended as a first step out of poverty, and in fact it proved to be most important to poor individuals and households. The results of this investigation as well as previous ones, and the many positive effects so far achieved, demonstrate that BIG deserves to be continued.

It is still worth considering what BIG should aim for in the long run. Only that could satisfactorily answer the question whether BIG is big enough, or would need to be increased, or should rather be discontinued. Big enough for what?

- As a means of social security, BIG supports poor households escape destitution, but it is not the equivalent of a regular income.
- BIG does not make people lazy since they have to look for other means of income besides BIG.
- BIG allows for sustainable *social* growth, but is not big enough for sustainable *economic* growth.
- As a stimulus to individual economic endeavours and income-generating activities, additional economic programs would be necessary to provide investment capital.
- BIG shows positive effects on consumption behaviour by increasing buying power, thus supporting local markets, but is not big enough for self-perpetuating growth.
- The main benefit of BIG appears to be in serving as a social welfare program, but it does not take the place of programs for the advancement of the national economy.
- BIG is big enough to be used for more than just one possible purpose, depending not only on individual but also on cultural provisions and priorities.
- As a means of redistribution on a national scale, it might be able to downsize the enormous gap between the highest and the lowest income groups, but it will in no way change society.
- As an extra income for those who do not need it for subsistence, it is big enough to open a wide range of possibilities for social sponsoring.
- BIG can thereby serve as a means of providing more democracy and increasing citizens' involvement in the social and cultural field.

However, BIG is not a miracle weapon to fight all of the country's present social and economic problems, as the current discussions might make one believe. Rather than arguing from an either/or perspective, additional programs with synergetic effects will need to be initiated. Whether on a local or regional or national level, a *basic income grant* cannot be more than a *base*. It cannot possibly replace economic, educational or health programs.

Granted as a basic income, Namibians will appropriate and use this allowance according to their own norms of what is suitable for the basis of life, and they should be given the right to decide for themselves what makes their life liveable. It takes some courage to stand up for a national basic income grant on these grounds and defend it against internal and international votes. Even more needs to be done within Namibia to persuade people of the positive effects of BIG and why it should be granted to everyone and not just those in need. At the end of the day, the result might be that today's income differences persist – but on a much higher economic level, with less poverty, less destitution and perhaps less social injustice. After all, that would make it all worthwhile.

10. Books, articles and websites for further reading

Printed and digital media

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www.vemission.org/big

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