

Equality or Inequality? The choice is ours!

By Grafton Whyte

Earlier this month we had the pleasure of a visit from Professor Joseph Stiglitz, the 2001 Nobel Laureate for Economics. He was in Namibia at the invitation of the Presidency and addressed many audiences during his two day visit. The theme of his talk to three Namibian Universities was – Transforming an Economy: Challenges and Lessons for Namibia. Of the many interesting things he said, and what held my attention for many days afterwards as I wrestled with the implications of the statement was the assertion that, 'Inequality is a choice'. Somehow this statement both assaulted my sensibilities and challenged me at the same time.

The complexity of emotions I felt about this statement can be summarised in three words or ideas: Responsibility, Agency and Intent.

Firstly, the idea of Responsibility, the cause of my bruised sensibilities. In this Prof Stiglitz argued quite strongly that inequality didn't happen by accident, but is the result past policies and choices and that we are somehow complicit in the existence of inequality. This is a very radical thought and quite contrary to the prevailing discourse here in Namibia. Often the discussion about inequality suggests it is a problem handed down to us by previous administrations and we have been suffering from the effects of their choices. The idea that we might be complicit in the continued

existence of inequality is something not generally accepted. In fact, the instinctive reaction is to reject this notion as no one wants to be seen as a perpetrator of inequality. I am suggesting in this article that we should ignore our instinctive reaction and indeed accept that our choice of policies and implementation thereof are responsible for at least maintaining the current levels of inequality in Namibia.

Rather than diminishing, this idea empowers us, as it suggests we have Agency (the second idea), the means or power to make different choices that will reduce and eventually dispel inequality. We are not passive recipients of the social order, neither is the society in which we live a black box over which we have no control, we have agency and can choose to make this country look and feel very different for the majority of its citizens – a country where no one should feel left out, to quote the President. However, our ability to successfully transform the society depends on the capabilities of managers in the public and private sector to implement the various initiatives of the President's Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPP), this is particularly true for the public sector. We at the HP-GSB have argued in this column and on other platforms that this is one of the challenges to the success of the HPP. We have suggested that in parallel to the Government rolling out the HPP, it also

embarks on a national programme of up-skilling its managers and professionalising the managerial class in Namibia through education and training offered by its institutions of higher learning.

Finally, if we are serious about dispelling inequality, then we need to act with Intent, (the third idea). Experience suggests that social ills (i.e. inequality, injustice, discrimination, poverty and corruption), like addictions, are much harder to quit than avoid. Therefore, it is only with determined intent that inequality will be expelled from our society. This will mean Government taking hard decisions which will almost certainly hurt vested interests, as there are always sections of society that profit from social ills. It also means that Government will need to be bold in navigating uncharted policy areas and be willing to change course if particular policies do not seem to be achieving the desired results. The Namibian Government, with the HPP as its flagship programme in its war against inequality, is taking responsibility, acting with agency and moving with determined intent to consign inequality to the pages of history. We as members of the Namibian House can do nothing else but applaud the Government's unprecedented boldness and engage with them in the struggle.

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