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## **Civil society sets out priorities for 2024/25 budget**

On 14 August 2023 civil society organisations held a consultation meeting with the Minister of Finance and Public Enterprises, Hon. Iipumbu Shiimi, and the Director-General of the National Planning Commission, Hon. Obeth Kandjoze, regarding priorities for national budget.

The consultation was held ahead of the 2023 mid-year budget and intended to inform the 2024-25 budget process. The meeting was organised by the Civil Society Information Centre (CIVIC +264) and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

Several civil society organisations (CSOs) prepared submissions which were delivered to the Ministry of Finance and Public Enterprises in August last year.

Key points that emerged from the consultation process included:

Civil society representatives, who are from the regions and those that travel the country for their work, said that the levels of poverty and desperation among ordinary Namibians is unprecedented since independence.

Unfortunately, as no national surveys have been undertaken since 2017 to establish the extent of poverty and unemployment (and the 2023 Census is unlikely to produce results until later this year), civil society activists have to follow the evidence of their eyes - and that is that extreme poverty is pervasive across the country.

The other key consensus points that emerged from the civil society budget consultation process are that:

- There is an urgent need for a Basic Income Grant to be rolled out. The previous Cabinet decision to convert the food bank into a monthly cash grant is welcome but the numbers of beneficiaries are negligible in comparison to the scale of the problem.
- The housing and sanitation situation in informal settlements is dire. In early 2019 late President Geingob declared that situation in the country's informal settlements as a national crisis. Yet the situation seems to be worsening while significant funding is still needed. We have a splendid civil society example of what can be done in the form of

the Shackdwellers Federation but they are underfunded. A direct fund for local authorities to subsidise the price of serviced plots and make them more accessible is needed while giving people options to incrementally build on their land. The slowness in developing and implementing policy in the area of housing and sanitation is a major concern e.g. the delays around the revised housing policy and implementation plan drafted in 2022 but only approved by Cabinet in November 2023.

- The third consensus point is that there is an urgent need to invest in early childhood development (ECD). The benefits of significant investment in ECD are well documented and could go a long way to improving educational outputs overall. At the moment, spending in the education system is skewed with very low spending per child in the early years.

Submissions that were received from the Council of Churches in Namibia, Development Workshop, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia, the Namibia Housing Action Group as well as several other CSOs concur on these points.

Other key issues that were raised include:

The need to close funding gaps in the fight against malaria and other deadly diseases which was raised by Flame Namibia (Faith Leader Advocacy for Malaria Elimination). Flame argues that deficient public financial management undermines effective spending in the health sector.

Uhili Necessity Welfare Trust called on government to do more to support preventative programming for at-risk youth within the community by setting up centres and supporting CSO activity in this area.

Several CSOs argued for greater support for the informal economy and more coordinated assistance for SMEs. We need to know much more about how the informal economy functions - and the Namibia Statistics Agency could play a key role here.

There is also much concern about the capital expenditure in the Development Budget. While these construction projects create temporary jobs are they productive in other ways? More consultation about the necessity of large infrastructure projects, based on cost-benefit analyses, could help us avoid the creation of white elephants when those funds could be much better spent elsewhere.

Civil society is grateful that the Minister listened to civil society in 2020 regarding the removal of VAT from sanitary pads. We would like to know what impact this policy change has had, but more fundamentally organisations like Y-Fem want to see this policy developed further and extended.

Finally, while many CSOs welcome the participatory mechanisms that the Ministry and the NPC are developing around budget formulation - more such efforts are always needed. One suggestion is that ministries present accountability reports on their spending on public platforms. In this respect, civil society organisations would like to see parliament and its committees becoming more active in holding public hearings on specific areas of expenditure.

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