

# Is Affirmative Action Still Essential?

AN ECONOMIC POLICY Research Association (Epra) report titled 'Taking Stock after 25 Years of Affirmative Action in Namibia' drew a predictable reaction.

A well-researched critique based on empirical results was rebutted by generic statements that "data has limitations" and "historic legacies still shape ongoing economic inequalities".

The article by Mbango Sihela in *The Namibian* of 10 March did not provide a scientific response to the Epra report as the matter is contentious, especially for the black economic elite and the scores of well-connected tenderpreneur millionaires.

Sihela believes the white minority still holds the economic power in

Namibia and therefore affirmative action and empowerment remain essential.

He offers no empirical evidence and defaults to generalised concepts of colonisation, apartheid and white economic domination as the backbone of his argument that affirmative action and black economic empowerment should continue.

The intention of affirmative action and empowerment was to transform Namibia's economy by enhancing black economic participation in the economy.

The policy was meant to address inequality, unemployment and poverty.

It was initially not meant to benefit the elites or the rich.

At independence, whites were about

6,7% of the total population – 33 years later they are an even smaller minority.

At independence, unemployment was about 18% and public debt zero percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

Currently, unemployment is estimated at 38%, and public debt at 70% of GDP.

Inequality is still high and poverty is rampant.

We now know a tiny black elite benefited from these policies, and state capture and corruption remains contentious.

What can we learn? Should the majority (97%) still be protected against a tiny minority?

From a justice and moral perspective only, those who benefited under

apartheid should compensate those who suffered under apartheid.

Such a project is very difficult to implement in practice. Most of those who lived in the fifties and sixties are in retirement or dead.

Those whites who came to Namibia after apartheid or who didn't benefit from apartheid invested, started businesses and have children.

A permanent feature of institutionalised racism is morally wrong and highly unethical, so when do we end affirmative action?

Currently, there is no public discourse on the end of affirmative action, and that in itself shows how flawed the process is.

After 33 years of independence, there is still no appetite among politi-

cians to insert a sunset clause in race-based legislation and policies.

The question arises: Is it the responsibility of the present white minority to collectively redress past wrongs committed by a previous generation?

Is such a policy desirable in overriding individual rights of many who had nothing to do with apartheid or those who never benefited from it?

Should one not strive towards a colour-blind society which values giving assistance to disadvantaged people irrespective of race?

Should affirmative action policies not rather be based on means and not only race?

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