

THE DEVELOPMENT BRIGADE: THE NAMIBIAN EXPERIENCE

By Simon Shikangalah

At independence, the new government in Namibia found itself faced with tens of thousands of demobilised fighters from both side of the conflict. Some of these men and women were absorbed into the national army and others into the police force. Many others, however, had nowhere to go and effectively swelled the ranks of the unemployed. These people possessed no skills of any kind which they could sell in the labour market. Their expectations, dreams and aspirations were high, but there was nowhere for them to go, no jobs, no shelter, no food. They needed special attention to alleviate their predicament. The socio-political and security considerations were also paramount in the minds of our leaders.

Taking a panoramic view of the situation, two fault lines dominated the picture, namely the lack of practical skills for self-employment whether as individuals or in co-operative groups and the lack of jobs in the small Namibian private sector. The only logical conclusion was, therefore, to:

- ❑ give the people training in functional skills (as plumbers, carpenters, bricklayers, etc.) and thus enable them to support themselves economically; and
- ❑ identify viable projects (job creation) where these people could be productively deployed. The Development Brigades idea (already being implemented in Zimbabwe and to a lesser degree in Botswana) was therefore decided on.

For two years (1991 and 1992) the Development Brigade was a department of the Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rehabilitation. This was appropriate in the sense that these people needed land, to be resettled and rehabilitated. The Brigade also shared the budget of this Ministry. But with the passing of time some serious problems arose.

The first of these was inadequate funding: As is the case with many training organisations, the demand far out-stripped the financial resources. It was necessary to engage in some income generating projects to supplement government allocations. The Brigade went into water drilling, erven servicing, brick making, poultry, construction (houses), etc.

The second problem was the lack of managerial expertise: These projects needed a lot of managerial expertise in order to be successful. This expertise was and still is, a very rare commodity amongst these people.

But there were also other impediments: It was also discovered that the Development Brigade as a department of a Ministry could not engage in purely commercial activities for profit.

Towards the end of 1992 it was decided that the Development Brigade would have to be converted into a parastatal organisation. This was achieved with the passing of Act 32 of 1992 which established the Development Brigade Corporation as it exists today.

The people who enter the Brigade sacrificed much. They offered their lives and forwent education to fight for the liberation of their country. Now that the goal has been achieved and finding no way of securing a decent living, they are saying *"we have performed our part, it is now your turn. Our Government must now provide."* The belief is *"pay up, you owe us, you owe us!"* Yet, their expectations are unfulfilled and are unlikely soon to be met. With limited resources on one hand and a compelling need for social stability on the other, the call to pay up presents, indeed, a very serious problem.

To date, (mid 1994) about four thousand trainees have passed through the Development Brigade. During 1994 alone one thousand six hundred graduated. About fifteen percent of all graduates of the past three years have found work in the private sector, about twenty percent in the public service and about fifty five percent are running their own businesses mostly as co-operatives/partnerships. However, management skills (project management) and financial assistance (start-up capital) will continue to be headaches for the foreseeable future.

The Namibian experience has provided a number of lessons, some of the important of which are:

- ❑ Spell out exactly what you want to achieve with anything like a Development Brigade and make sure that all concerned understand this.
- ❑ Take a long term perspective, short term expedencies easily result in long term nightmares.
- ❑ There is no substitute for good planning. If you don't have enough time to plan properly now, you will need even more time to do it over again.
- ❑ Socio-economic accommodation and rehabilitation of ex-fighters should be treated as a national responsibility regardless of political affiliations. It is in the interest of every citizen that peace and stability prevails. A hungry man is an angry man.
- ❑ Consult widely - the danger comes from ignorance of what is really going on.

The Namibian experience was mostly a trial by error exercise and some bitter lessons have been learnt. It is also clear that the basics are now in place and some successes have been recorded. Yet the terrain ahead still looks rough. However, in the spirit of nation building and national reconciliation the Brigade should succeed.

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