OPENING SPEECH

BY

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AT

THE SASPEN AND FES INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
COMPREHENSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION IN THE SADC

“SOCIAL JUSTICE, SOLIDARITY AND DEVELOPMENT-THE ROLE OF
SOCIAL PROTECTION IN ERADICATING POVERTY, OVERCOMING
INEQUALITIES AND EMPOWERING PEOPLE”

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1. I acknowledge the presence of all conference dignitaries in their respective capacities and therefore observe all protocols accordingly.

2. Director of proceedings, allow me at the onset to extend my utmost gratitude to the Southern African Social Protection Experts Network (SASPEN) and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), the conveners of this conference, for inviting me, in my current capacity as the Minister of the newly created Ministry of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, to deliver an opening statement at a conference of this magnitude.

3. This is indeed an indication of the significant role Namibia plays and will continue to play in the journey towards achieving Agendas 2030 and 2063, especially with the declaration of an all-out war against poverty by His Excellency Dr. Hage G. Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia.

4. This Conference is important and timely in view of the social challenges faced by African populations; and also in view of the international and continental socio-economic development agenda, as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals and African Union Agenda 2063 respectively.
5. Despite positive economic growth in many African countries and the abundance of natural resources, the continent has registered slow progress on the human development index. The majority of African people also continue to be caught up in a vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion. Therefore we require unified action, timely implementation, monitoring and evaluation of social protection policies and programmes, if we have to address these social challenges.

6. Such approach is indeed a pre-requisite for achieving the internationally agreed development goals and bring prosperity to the population of Africa. Indeed, the World Summit on Social Development has identified combating poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion as the three cornerstones of a successful social policy.

7. It has also been recognised that combating these social development challenges will require adoption of inclusive social protection systems which are essential in protecting citizens from risks and vulnerabilities and aimed at ensuring a decent minimum standard of living for our people.

8. There is indeed growing political commitment in Africa to develop such systems as evidenced by various continental conferences, such as the one held in Zambia in 2008, where governments committed themselves to advance social protection in support of their most disadvantaged citizens.
9. These are reflected in the Livingstone Call for Action which requires governments amongst others to:

- Develop costed plans on social protection within 3 years and engage in capacity building and experience sharing to support this work;

- Explore linkages with national programmes on social protection as well as clearer linkages between Africa-wide social development programmes and policies adopted by the African Union Commission to that effect;

- Adopt comprehensive social protection schemes for older people with particular emphasis on universal social pensions;

- Coordinate social protection measures being implemented by various Ministries through a comprehensive national coordination framework.

10. Like other African countries, Namibia is not immune to social challenges which include widespread poverty, unemployment, gender-based violence, diseases, droughts, environmental degradation, poor access to basic infrastructure such as roads, clinics, schools, secure housing and social services such as potable water, electricity and sanitation; education and training, and healthcare.
11. The majority of our people work in the informal economy and are therefore vulnerable to job insecurity, low and erratic income, and lack basic social protection. Given the gendered structure of our societies, and their low status, women and girls are more severely affected by the scourge of poverty and other social ills.

12. Moreover the challenges bring into sharp focus the issues of inequity, inequality and social exclusion. They touch on the very core of our societies which are the human dignity and the human rights of those most vulnerable.

13. As alluded to earlier, this Conference is taking place at a time when Namibia has declared an “all-out” war on poverty and has committed herself to building prosperity for her people. Namibia plans to beat the global sustainable development agenda target by five years, by eradicating poverty and attaining prosperity for all Namibians by the year 2025. This might appear impossible, but in my view poverty can be eradicated.

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18. Poverty is a crime against humanity, resulting mainly from corruption and greed. Poverty, like many social ills the world is facing today is man-made, and therefore must be eradicated by humans; BUT ONLY if we root out corruption, self-enrichment, selfishness and greed.
14. Therefore, issues of good governance, driven by empathy and respect for human dignity are imperative in the fight against poverty and our quest for prosperity for all.

15. Fighting poverty is fundamentally about promoting human rights, human dignity and social justice thereby ensuring that people have access to food, water, shelter, clothing and so on. As President Hage Geingob stated in his maiden state of the nation address that: and I quote “The first step in the fight against poverty is the recognition that all Namibians deserve a dignified life; and what is required is that all Namibians treat each other with dignity and respect and that all Namibians play their role in uplifting their fellow human being”, end of quote.

16. Moreover, when we adopted the Namibian Constitution we committed ourselves to set our people on a path that would lead them from a society based on inequality to a society that promotes social justice and restores human dignity, particularly of the poor and marginalized.

17. I have stated on many occasions that defining poverty should be dynamic and should keep up with factors such as inflations, changing economic, political and environmental conditions.
18. Therefore, I believe that in the case of Namibia, you can be regarded as poor if you go hungry to bed or eat from the dumpsite, share drinking water from a well with livestock, cannot afford a decent house, still rely on nearby bushes when nature calls and do not have access to decent health services”.

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19. Like the case with many African countries, Namibia has made significant progress in the fight against poverty since independence, 26 years ago. Official statistics show that we have reduced poverty from 69.3% to 28.7% between 1994 and 2010. However, in his maiden state of the nation address, His Excellency, Dr. Hage G. Geingob, said that even at 5% poverty will still be high and we should not hide behind statistics, but should rather aim at the total eradication of poverty.

20. Reports have also shown that Namibia has one of the most comprehensive social protection systems in Africa and according to the National Statistics Agency (NSA), the introduction of social safety nets and the Universal old age and disability grants, has played a major role in the reduction of poverty.
21. Despite these positives strides, Namibia remains one of the world most unequal nation, in terms of income inequality. Furthermore, there is a substantial number of poor and vulnerable Namibians that fall between the cracks of our current social protection programmes.

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22. Allow me to highlight some of the measures taken by the Namibian Government in addressing social challenges and fighting the war against poverty:

23. At the Policy and legislative level

- The establishment of the Ministry of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare.
- The adoption of the Harambee Prosperity Plan, which is a targeted action plan to accelerate development in clearly defined priority areas, which lay the basis for attaining prosperity in Namibia.
- Adoption of the Blueprint of Wealth Redistribution and Poverty Eradication.
24. The key actions under these two documents include the following:

- Strengthening efforts in creating a comprehensive, integrated social protection system. Currently the system is very fragmented and we are in the process of investigating the feasibility of consolidating the social grants into a more effective coordinated safety net.


- The National Pension Fund will be operationalized to cater for employed Namibians who are currently excluded from pension/retirement funds.

- Establishment of the Food Bank to address urban and peri-urban hunger. A pilot was launched in the Khomas region on the 30th June 2016; and within 3 months, a total of 19,161 households comprising of 80,370 individuals have benefited from this social assistance programme.

- Since the creation of the Ministry of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, we have witness a wind of change in the Namibian society, whereby people are eager to donate towards the plight of the poor;
• Therefore, the Ministry in collaboration with the Office of The President has established a special fund through which the monetary donations are channeled to cater for special poverty eradication programmes. The in-kind donations are channeled through the Food Bank to beneficiaries.

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25. Through the National Blueprint on Poverty Eradication and Wealth Redistribution, the Ministry will explore mechanisms of rolling out a grant scheme for the unemployed, poor and vulnerable that are excluded from the current social welfare grants.

26. A basic income is necessary to cater for those that are falling between the cracks of our social protection schemes. This will empower our people and help them to develop themselves. This will also provide the poor with choices and allow them to diversify their life supporting systems; and to cope better with unforeseen circumstances such as climate change related shocks.

27. Having stated that, we are mindful of the fact that effective implementation of law, policies and commitments; the availability of resources and proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, will be key in achieving success in our war on poverty.
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28. This Conference will provide an opportunity for exchange of ideas and experiences; but most importantly will enable us to work together in unity to eradicate poverty on our Continent.

29. It critical that we ensure social protection remains high on the agenda and that priority is given to the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized through appropriately designed social protection systems.

30. While it is clear that there is no single framework for social protection, it is however fundamental to have an integrated coordination and harmonization mechanism for our social protection policies and programmes, if we have tackle the scourges of poverty faced by our people.

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31. In conclusion, I want to emphasize the need for us as Africans to reclaim the long established tradition of African solidarity, which has the potential of garnishing support from individuals and organizations for efforts of eradicating poverty.
32. We need to remain committed in advancing a social development agenda which promotes human rights, social justice and integrity. As we embark on our deliberations, we should bear in mind that the situation on the ground is dire and urgent; therefore the discussions should not only end in words, but they should be translated into tangible actions, that will change the crying face of Africa for a long lasting justice, peace and prosperity.

I pray for fruitful deliberations

GOD BLESS AFRICA AND GOD BLESS US ALL