

## **Michael le Cordeur: R370 does not buy you freedom**

**The government's extension for the disbursement of an emergency grant to the unemployed for another year is, according to Michael le Cordeur, an abuse of taxpayers' money to win votes for the ruling party.**

I was only 11 years old and in Std 4 when I worked in Mrs Steenkamp's garden in the afternoons after school for pocket money. After Std 6, I worked on Boet Malan's farm during the December holidays to earn money for Christmas gifts. In Std 8, I had to pay R50 as an examination fee – money we didn't have. As a result, I had to work as a henchman on a construction site during the winter holidays. After matric, I had to pay R100 registration fee at the University of the Western Cape. For a poor family with six children, R100 was food for a week. During that December holiday, I worked as a henchman for my brother, a welder, when the West Coast School was built at Saldanha. That's how I learned gardening, building and welding – skills I still use to this day.

I've learned nothing in life is for free, even if you're poor. I came to the realisation early on that if I wanted to achieve something, it had to be earned. After all, the motto of my school, Berg River High, is “Work produces success. Real freedom comes with hard work”.

On Saturday, 27 April we celebrate Freedom Day. It is 30 years since Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first democratic president of South Africa. In his book, *Long Walk to Freedom*, one reads that young Madiba's initial idea of freedom was rather limited: For him, freedom meant playing carefree in open fields, swimming in the clean river and riding on the back of an ox.

However, Mandela soon realised that this was a narrow view of freedom. As he grew older, he began to think differently about it. That he can only be truly free if all South Africans enjoy the same privileges. A life that does justice to one's human dignity and self-respect was non-negotiable for Mandela. He made it his life's task to fight for a better life for all. For that, he would sacrifice his life. Even spent 27 years in prison.

### **Election gimmick?**

It is unfortunate that Madiba's noble goal is being distorted by the current regime to suit their own agenda. The last decade of ANC rule does not inspire in any way. It calls for a different agenda.

Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana announced in February that the disbursement of the grant introduced during Covid-19 as an emergency measure would be extended by another year. Pres Cyril Ramaphosa even hinted in his State of the Nation Address that this could become a permanent arrangement.

In March, Godongwana announced that the grant would be increased from R350 to R370 on 1 April.

When these announcements were made, I could hardly suppress the feeling that this was a ploy to garner votes.

Some nine million people now receive this grant. These are people who were stripped of their dignity on that very first day when they had to queue for the monthly handout of R350.

Just over a third of all South Africans are unemployed, while the burden on taxpayers is increasing. It's an untenable situation.

What Ramaphosa actually had to acknowledge in his State of the Nation Address was that unemployment is a crisis. And that it puts pressure on families to put food on the table. And that the state wants and needs to help and therefore offers this aid package, but that it is only temporary and not a sustainable solution.

The government's point of departure with the unemployment allowance is that it will help people "to live a little better". This is miles removed from Mandela's idea of a "better life for all".

### **Fish and a fishing rod**

A successful government protects its citizens, meets their basic needs and invests in the development of people's skills. If citizens feel they have a stake in the country, they will treat it with greater respect, preserve it, keep it tidy and develop it.

Recently, I stopped next to a queue of people as I was looking for two workers to assist – at a cost of much more than R350 for the day – with extra chores at my house. No one was willing to do that.

It's a disturbing development, because if you expose people to the wrong thing long enough, it becomes the norm later on. To me, this is precisely the biggest concern about this grant – that people become dependent on the state and lose the will to work.

In March this year, Statistics South Africa released data according to which the average salary in the country before deductions amounts to R26 894. When Netwerk24 reported on this, people wrote in the comments section to the post that it was impossible to live a respectable life on this salary.

If you deduct rent, electricity, water, medical aid, services, school funds, insurance and petrol, not much remains for food.

So, what can you buy for R370?

The saying goes that if you give someone a fish, you feed him for a day, but if you teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. To me, that R370 is a fish. Because how many schools and houses can we build with the money spent on this grant? How many scholarships can be given to young people so that they can learn skills that would make them self-sufficient?

### **Create jobs instead**

Ramaphosa should note the wisdom of Chinese philosopher Confucius: To lead your people by empowering them, you strengthen your leadership.

How many South Africans are taught skills so that they can start their own businesses? In contrast, many people from all over African countries come to South Africa and start businesses for which there is a clear need. But because South Africans are not entrepreneurial, they miss out on these opportunities.

And the government is stuck with its own narrow idea of job creation by creating more jobs in the public service, while the country cannot afford it at all. A growing salary bill without greater productivity contributes to the stagnation of the economy.

The only way to stop poverty is to teach people to be self-sufficient. But how do you develop people's skills when they're queuing up for a grant?

What would be the outcome if government used the billions spent on the R370 grant to launch job creation projects? To rather pay people to people to remove garbage, paint public buildings, and repair potholes?

This will not only help people to learn skills, but also to regain their self-respect and human dignity.

Ultimately, South Africans only have two choices: You queue up for a grant and buy food for a day, or you empower yourself by acquiring a skill and become part of an economically active group of people who contribute to the country.

Mandela dreamed of a South Africa where people are free from poverty. "Being free is more than just shaking off the handcuffs and closing the prison doors behind you. It also means being financially able to provide for your family," he believed.

But this means that the country must have a government that invests in its people – not one that makes citizens dependent on a government or a ruling party.

•*Prof Le Cordeur is the Vice-Dean: Teaching and Learning at Stellenbosch University's Faculty of Education. This article first appeared on [Netwerk24](#).*