

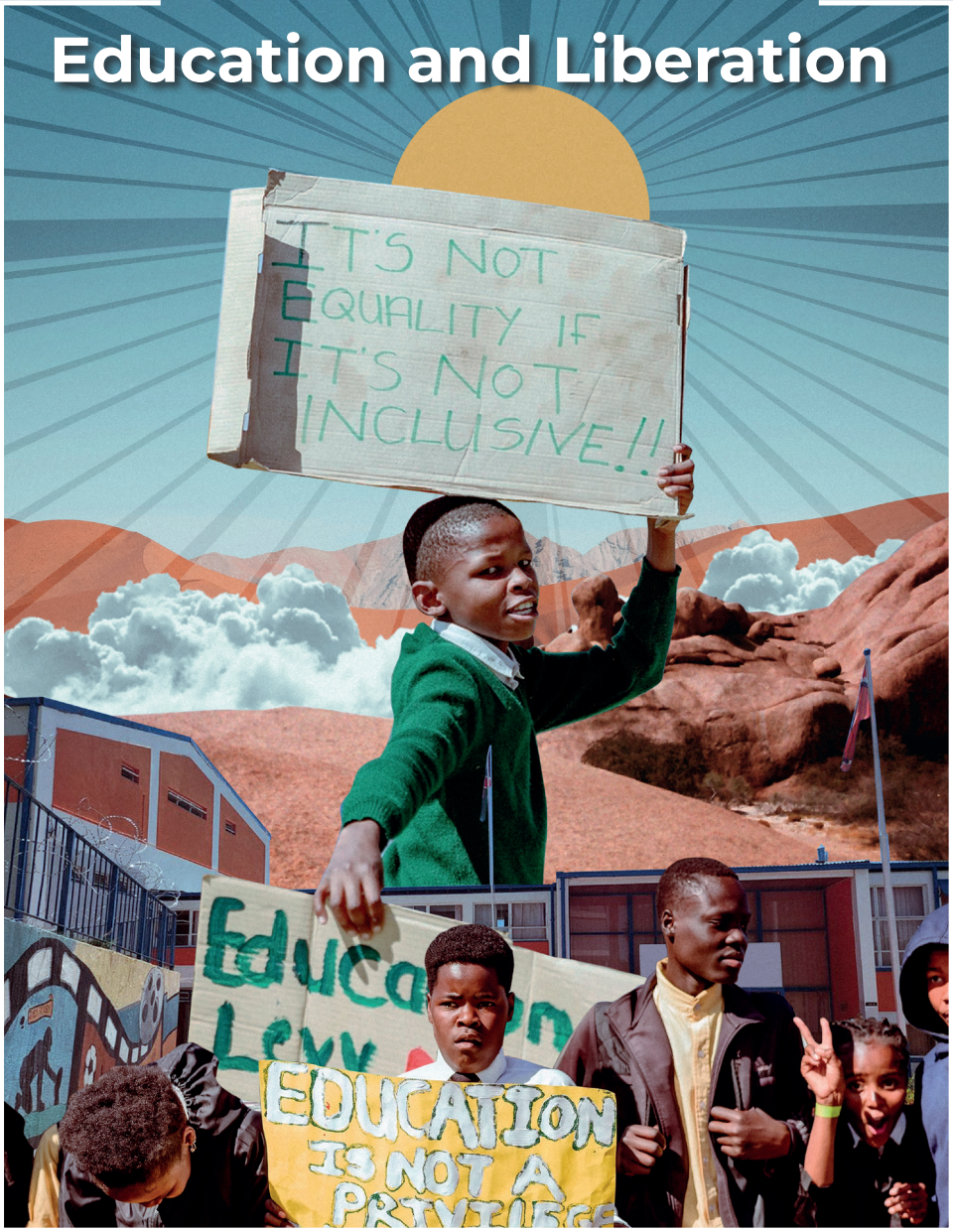
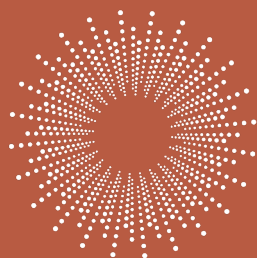


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The Quest for Education for Liberation: The Case of the Namibia National Students Organisation

Ndumba J. Kamwanyah

Abstract:

In this case study, I explore the foundational role played by the Namibia National Students Organisation (NANSO) in advancing education as a site of political struggle and social transformation during the national liberation struggle. Founded in 1984 amidst the repressive colonial and apartheid regime of South Africa in Namibia, NANSO's history is a testament to the interconnectedness of education, political consciousness, and collective action.

Drawing from archival records, liberation-era documents, and my own positionality in the student movement, this case study analyses NANSO's political programme, organisational structures and campaigns, and the repression it endured at the hands of the apartheid state. From that perspective, the case study situates NANSO within the broader discourse of Education for Liberation, arguing that its legacy remains relevant in contemporary debates on equitable and decolonised education in Namibia.



The NANSO Cassinga Day march of 4 May 1988 brought thousands of students into the streets and showed that students were no longer willing to accept colonial oppression. Source: John Liebenberg

Introduction

Globally, education has been both a site of oppression and a practice of freedom—one that equips students (and teachers) not only with analytical and methodological skills, but also with the critical consciousness necessary to understand, challenge, and transform unequal social, political, and economic structures. In Namibia's colonial and apartheid history, education was weaponised to reinforce racial segregation and social inequality under the mantra of Bantu Education. In this context, NANSO emerged in 1984 as a pivotal force in student mobilisation and resistance. The organisation's formation and subsequent activism reflect the conception of Paulo Freire (1970/2007) of education for liberation, which emphasises the development of critical consciousness and the mobilisation of oppressed communities for social change. He called it the pedagogy of the oppressed.

Historical background:

The formation of NANSO

Founded on 2 June 1984 at Döbra, NANSO arose in response to the fragmented and racially segregated education system imposed by apartheid. Students across Namibia were subjected to Bantu Education which was characterised by inferior curricula, overcrowded classrooms, and racial discrimination. NANSO

provided a unified platform that cut across regional and institutional boundaries, offering students a national voice in fighting for student interests in the broader anti-colonial resistance.

The formation of NANSO was fundamentally a response to colonial domination, oppression and apartheid education policies that systematically excluded most of the Namibian youth from access to universal, quality education. The colonial education system entrenched inequalities by discriminating on the basis of race, ethnicity, and gender, thereby intentionally limiting educational opportunities for Black and Coloured Namibians while privileging a minority. Many students were denied access to schools, adequate resources, and post-secondary education, reinforcing cycles of social and economic marginalisation. In confronting these injustices, NANSO organised under the slogan “education is a right, not a privilege”, articulating a clear demand for free, inclusive, and equitable education as a central component of national liberation and social justice.

The organisation was influenced by the earlier ideologies of liberation movements like the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) and regional counterparts such as the South African Students Organisation (SASO). However, NANSO maintained an

autonomous stance while supporting the broader liberation goals of SWAPO.

Political Programme and Activities

NANSO's political programme was grounded in democratic ideals, anti-colonialism, and student empowerment. It viewed education as a transformative force for development and social progress, rather than as a privilege. As attested by NANSO internal documents from 1984–1990, central to the organisation's agenda at that time were demands for:

- free and compulsory education for all Namibians;
- the dismantling of the racially segregated school system;
- the right to student representation in school governance;
- the removal of colonial curricula and the implementation of Afrocentric education;
- an end to military conscription of youth; and
- the removal of military bases from school premises.

As Amukugo (1995) argues, Namibia's liberal democratic framework after independence has often prioritised equality of opportunity over structural social justice. NANSO's earlier activism challenged such limitations by insisting on education as a

human right and public good tied to national liberation.

Organisational structure and leadership

NANSO operated within a decentralised framework that brought together school-level groups, regional formations, and a central national leadership, in a federalised approach. This organisational arrangement enabled broad-based student involvement and ensured that local concerns could be effectively addressed. The organisation's leadership was chosen through democratic processes, with positions such as president, secretary-general, and regional organisers playing a central role in guiding its activities and strategic vision. In addition, specialised committees dedicated to political education, international solidarity, and gender equity were crucial in cultivating NANSO's internal political ethos. Notably, many former members of the organisation went on to assume prominent positions in government and civil society following independence.

Tertiary education students, both within South African universities and at the then Academy in Namibia, played a particularly significant role within NANSO, and frequently constituted its core leadership. Exposure to broader political debates, liberation movements, and international soli-

darity networks at these institutions helped to sharpen their organisational and ideological capacities. Students studying in South Africa often acted as important conduits for ideas, strategies, and external support, while those at the Academy provided a local intellectual and organisational base for mobilisation inside Namibia. As a result, many of the democratically elected leaders who occupied key positions within NANSO—including roles on the national executive structure—were drawn from the ranks of tertiary students, reinforcing the organisation's strong emphasis on political education, disciplined leadership, and long-term movement building.

At the same time, secondary school students were crucial to NANSO's vitality at the grassroots level, anchoring the organisation's school-based committees and regional structures, where they mobilised peers, articulated local grievances, and ensured a steady pipeline of activists into the broader student movement.

Campaigns and mobilisation strategies

Throughout the 1980s, NANSO spearheaded several high-impact campaigns that exposed the failures and injustices of colonialism and apartheid education. These included:

- the 1988 country-wide School Boycott, which involved mass student protests and refusals to attend school in response to curriculum and administrative grievances, as well as the demand for demilitarisation of education. The 1988 country-wide School Boycott was further marked by mass class boycotts and widespread arrests, particularly in opposition to the continued use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, underscoring both the depth of student resistance and the coercive response of the authorities;
- the Anti-Conscription Campaign, which challenged the forced conscription of Namibian youth into the South African military and the South West Africa Territorial Force; and
- the 1989 Voter Education and Election Campaign, which prepared young people to participate in Namibia's anticipated first democratic elections, which brought about independence.

These actions employed non-violent resistance strategies, including marches, hunger strikes, underground mobilisation and publications, and collaboration with workers' unions, churches and international solidarity

movements. Despite harsh responses from the colonial state, these campaigns contributed significantly to the broader liberation struggle and international pressure on the apartheid regime.

Repression and state surveillance

As a student-led organisation advocating for systemic change, NANSO faced persistent repression by the apartheid security apparatus. The South West Africa Police, the South West Africa Territorial Force, and the South African Defence Force frequently disrupted meetings, arrested leaders, and infiltrated student networks.

Detentions without trial, torture, and school closures were common tactics used to suppress dissent (Amukugo, 1995). Despite this, NANSO adapted by operating semi-clandestinely and aligning itself with supportive churches, trade unions, and non-governmental organisations.

Institutions that shaped and nurtured NANSO activism

Beyond NANSO's own organisational efforts, a plethora of institutions played a decisive role in shaping its critical consciousness, linking education to political struggle. Martin Luther High School and Döbra High School, along

with other schools in the country, served as intellectual incubators where students encountered ideas of resistance and self-determination. On the other hand, church institutions, especially through the Council of Churches in Namibia, provided moral legitimacy and organisational support, framing education as both a spiritual and a liberatory mission. Similarly, trade unions such as the Mine Workers Union of Namibia, the Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union, the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union and the Namibia Public Workers Union mobilised workers and students around shared grievances, reinforcing the notion that education was inseparable from the broader struggle for justice. In addition, liberation movements, particularly SWAPO, emphasised the transformative potential of education as a weapon against colonial domination, nurturing a generation of activists who viewed classrooms as sites of resistance.

Together, these institutions created a network of solidarity that empowered NANSO to position education not merely as a technical skill but as a vehicle for social transformation and national liberation. In this way, these institutions collectively laid the groundwork for NANSO's emergence, embedding education within the broader struggle for liberation and social transformation.

Legacy and contemporary relevance

Since Namibia's independence in 1990, NANSO has continued to exist, though its role has shifted. While some critics have argued that it has become more aligned with ruling party politics, NANSO remains active in advocating for affordable education and student rights.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that NANSO's engagements have been depoliticised, particularly in comparison to the overtly radical stance that characterised NANSO's early years. Nevertheless, recent debates on university tuition fees, student debt, and the quality of public education in independent Namibia echo the organisation's foundational activism and mission. According to Shikalepo (2019), current education policy often fails to account for the structural inequalities rooted in colonialism and apartheid. NANSO's historical commitment to Education for Liberation therefore continues to offer a framework for reimagining Namibian education beyond mere access, towards genuine equity and transformation.

Conclusion

NANSO's history reflects the critical role that student activism can play in resisting oppression and advancing the cause of education as a fundamental human right. The organisation's ideological foundation, grassroots mobilisation, and resistance to repression position it firmly within the global tradition of education for liberation. In revisiting NANSO's past, current and future activists can find inspiration and guidance for building a just, decolonised, and inclusive education system in Namibia.

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