

# **Human Resource Development and Affirmative Action in Namibia: *A Trade Union Perspective***

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**1999**

## **1. Introduction**

After almost 10 years of independence, issues like quality education for all, skills development, affirmative action and human resource development strategies are still high on our national agenda. Independence promised a better life for the majority and education and training were seen as vehicles to escape the cycle of poverty and unemployment. However, despite a continuous high allocation of our national budget to education, Namibia is still confronted by a lack of skills, high unemployment, inequalities in access to education and apartheid legacies in the workplace. These are burning issues for the Namibian labour movement. Our members will not be able to achieve a life in human dignity unless Namibia can break out of the present state of high unemployment coupled with low skill – low wage jobs for most of our workers. Although issues like job creation, skills development and quality of jobs are closely linked to the question of economic policy, this paper will mainly focus on the questions of education, training and affirmative action as means to overcome some of Namibia's colonial legacies.

I assume that it is well known how the colonial education system has been used as one of the prime tools to perpetuate inequality. Before independence, education was administered by ethnic second tier authorities and expenditure on education was determined by the students' racial and ethnic classifications. In 1986/7, for example, the government spent 3 213 Rands on every white student while a black student in the northern region formerly known as 'Ovamboland' received only an average of 329

Rands. In 1989 the average class in a white school had fewer than 13 students and 92% of teachers there were fully qualified. By contrast, the average class size in 'Ovamboland' was 37 and only 2% of the teachers were qualified (World Bank 1991:13). Against this background it is hardly surprising that independent Namibia faced a tremendous lack of skills. The small pool of the privileged few could not provide the human resource base needed for sustainable economic development after independence.

## **2. Education for all**

When the new SWAPO government came to power in 1990, it promised to redress the colonial legacy by providing free and compulsory education for all. Article 20 of the constitution guaranteed free and compulsory primary education and government allocated between 23 – 28% of its annual budget to education. Within 3 years, the government had built 183 new schools and student enrolment had gone up by 20,9 % accompanied by an increase in the numbers of teachers by 18,7 %. The government's stated aim was to provide a universal basic education which should cover 10 years of schooling. Some steps were taken to create more equitable access to education, e.g. a school readiness programme was introduced in grade 1 to ensure that children who could not attend pre-school were not disadvantaged in comparison with their more privileged classmates who had had access to pre-schools. Other steps taken included the opening of former white schools to black children and the extension of adult – and non-formal education to cater for those disadvantaged Namibians who could not be accommodated in the formal school system (see Jauch 1998: 102-3; Ministry of Education and Culture 1993: 35-7).

Our union, the Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) as well as Namibian student organisations (especially NANSO) fully supported the education reform process but were concerned about the slow pace of change. We repeatedly encouraged the Ministry to take drastic steps to eradicate existing inequalities which continued to be reflected in the school's examination results. Year after year, examination results expose the continued gaps between urban and rural schools as well as between the former white schools and those in our townships. This can be attributed to the lack of trained teachers, educational materials and basic facilities such as libraries and laboratories in rural schools. Despite the progress made, much more needs to be done to redress the lack of physical and human resources in rural schools. Despite the introduction of monetary incentives for qualified teachers to go to rural schools, this attempt has largely failed due to a lack of facilities and housing in rural areas (Jauch 1998: 103). NANTU has repeatedly called upon the Ministry to provide teachers' housing as a precondition for attracting teachers to outlying areas. Due to financial constraints this was however not implemented. Likewise the government cites financial constraints as the main reason for the continued inequalities in education. According to government statistics, about 80% of the education budget is spent on salaries which limits the resources for the expansion of schools. The World Bank estimated that about N\$ 99 million would be needed annually for capital expenditure but the Ministry of Education only budgeted about a third of this amount (World Bank 1994:129).

Almost 10 years after independence, quality public education has been achieved only in relatively few of our public schools. In line with its policy of national reconciliation the government tried to maintain 'standards' at the privileged schools while trying to improve the conditions at disadvantaged schools. Unfortunately, this meant that the process of change was slow despite the high allocation of funds to the education ministry. Inequalities are still the order of the day in the Namibian education system and this poses one of the greatest challenges for the years ahead.

Besides the challenge of achieving a sound basic education system of good quality for all Namibians, we are also confronted by a chronic shortage of skilled personnel. This is especially true in technical fields and it is a matter of great concern if companies in Namibia advertise positions - such as toolmakers - but do not receive applications. There seems to be a gap between the skills needed in the Namibian economy and the training offered at our tertiary institutions. The lack of skilled personnel also points to the failure on the side of companies to identify their skills-needs in good time and to send staff members on training courses as part of staff development programmes. We believe that skills development requires the joint efforts of government and the private sector as providers of bursaries and training facilities. Gaps in the availability of skills should be identified and rectified through institutions like the vocational training board. We believe that so far, the private sector has not done nearly enough to give workers the opportunity to upgrade their knowledge and skills through certified courses. On the job training and short-term basic courses are certainly not enough to address the educational backlog. At present, very few companies seem interested to empower workers to move from unskilled and semi-skilled levels to the ranks of skilled labour.

### **3. The need for affirmative action**

Another critical aspect in addressing inequalities and our history of discrimination is affirmative action. As this term seems to mean different things to different people, I will first try to define our understanding. The term 'affirmative action' was first used in the civil rights movement in the USA. In that country, affirmative action was a policy of giving groups that were discriminated in the past (like black Americans or women) special opportunities to make up for the discrimination they suffered. This was done, for example, by reserving some jobs or bursaries for women, African - Americans and other minority groups. In other words, affirmative action was an attempt to compensate (to some extent) for past discrimination.

Affirmative action was also introduced in other countries, but under different names. In Sri Lanka and Malaysia, for example, affirmative action was introduced after independence to benefit ethnic majorities who had suffered from discrimination before. In India special policies were introduced in favour of the most disadvantaged groups, the so-called 'backward classes'.

In all these cases, affirmative action was a policy to address some of the inequalities that existed because of past discrimination. Affirmative action was introduced as a measure

to achieve a more balanced and just society. However, affirmative action should be seen as a temporary measure, otherwise it runs the risk of becoming a form of reverse discrimination. In Sri Lanka for example, people belonging to the ethnic Tamil minority felt that affirmative action was just a new form of unfair discrimination against them.

Affirmative action can be implemented in different ways. In education, for example, it can be implemented by providing schools, equipment and qualified teachers to neglected areas. In employment, it can be implemented by providing training and jobs for people who were kept out in the past. Likewise, in politics it can be implemented by giving quotas to groups of people who were under-represented in political institutions. Affirmative action can also be implemented during a process of land reform, for example by redistributing land in favour of the most disadvantaged people.

Affirmative action can help to make institutions like the civil service or companies' management more representative of the country's population. The policy can open doors for people who were left out in the past. Affirmative action measures should include training programmes for disadvantaged Namibians to enable them to obtain the skills needed to get better paid jobs. Affirmative action programmes should also change the way these institutions are run, for example by doing away with all forms of open and 'hidden' discrimination. Affirmative action can also help to redistribute resources like land or bursaries in favour of the poor. However, affirmative action is not a revolutionary policy and it must be kept in mind that affirmative action alone cannot overcome the huge inequalities that a country like Namibia is facing. Alongside affirmative action we need other policies to address the problems of inequality, unemployment and poverty.

In general, Namibia is facing 3 types of inequality, namely racial inequality along the colour lines, class inequalities (perpetuated through unemployment and a huge income gap) and gender inequalities. Black women continue to form the majority of the poor, they are concentrated in the lowest paid jobs and they are under-represented in positions of responsibility.

Although Namibia's constitution makes racial and gender discrimination a criminal offence, inequalities still persist in all areas mentioned above. This points to the need for affirmative action as a policy to speed up the process of change. I shall now highlight some areas in which affirmative action was implemented after independence.

#### **4. Affirmative action after independence**

The Constitution recognised that affirmative action was needed as one of the policies to bring about a more just society. Article 23 of the constitution was called 'Apartheid and Affirmative Action'. It states that laws can be passed to advance people who have been discriminated against in the past. The article also mentions that women suffered special discrimination and now need to be encouraged to play a full role in society. Article 23

allows the government to implement policies and programmes to create a more balance society and a more balanced public service.

### **The civil service**

At independence all management positions in the civil service were held by white men. The only exception was one white woman. Bound by the agreements reached in the run-up to independence, the new government could not simply fire the civil servants and replace them with black Namibians. Article 141 of the Constitution guaranteed all civil servants their jobs. However, the government wanted to 'level the playing field' and give equal opportunities to all Namibians. The government also wanted to make the civil service more representative of the country's population.

The Public Service Commission was given the task to achieve this aim and followed a policy of giving black Namibians (including 'coloureds') and women preference whenever appointments, promotions and transfers took place in the civil service. As most Namibians could not gain experience in the colonial civil service, the Commission also decided to relax the experience requirements. However, only people with the necessary qualifications were considered for appointments and promotions.

Statistical data reveal that six years after independence, about 70% of the management posts in the civil service were held by people from disadvantaged groups. Most of them were black men (52%) and only 13% were black women. These figures indicate that affirmative action made the civil service more representative but it did not promote women as much as men. Also, the huge income gap between the managers in the civil service and lower paid workers has remained. It even increased since independence! The new black managers - alongside the old white managers - now earn very high salaries while the vast majority of black workers in the civil service are still fighting for a living wage. Also, affirmative action in the civil service did not provide a systematic education and training programme for people who were denied such opportunities in the past. In our view, such programmes must be an integral part of affirmative action.

### **Affirmative Action in Agriculture**

In 1992, the government introduced the 'Affirmative Loan Scheme' to support communal farmers who wanted to buy land in a commercial farming area. The scheme is administered by the Agricultural Bank of Namibia. Loans at low interest rates are given to full-time communal farmers. However, such farmers need to have at least 150 cattle or 800 goats or sheep.

The loans given under the affirmative loan scheme do not cover the full amount. Communal farmers still have to pay about 10% of the price themselves. Given the high price of farms, this condition prevented many communal farmers from buying a commercial farm. In addition, farmers from the northern communal areas were not allowed to bring their animals across the 'red line' (veterinary fence) which separates the northern areas from the rest of the country. This meant that farmers from the North had to sell all their animals if they wanted to move to a commercial farm.

The Affirmative Loan Scheme did not resolve the burning land issue in Namibia. During the first 3 years of the scheme only 82 loans were given to communal farmers to buy commercial farms. The vast majority of commercial farms still remain in the hands of white farmers and the land issue is still one of the most hotly debated topics.

### **Affirmative Action in the Local Government Elections of 1992**

The Local Authorities Act of 1992 provided for a quota for women on the candidate lists of political parties. In municipal or town councils with up to 10 members, all political parties had to nominate at least 2 women while at least 3 women had to be nominated for councils with more than 10 members. This quota system had a positive effect on women's representation. All parties nominated more women than required by law. Out of the 362 elected councillors, 114 (or 31,5 %) were women. This is a much higher representation of women than in the National Council, the regional councils and the National Assembly where very few women are represented.

### **Affirmative action and fishing quotas**

The Sea Fisheries Act of 1992 states that the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources can apply affirmative action when allocating fishing quotas. Quotas can be given to people who have been disadvantaged in the past. However, this is only one of the criteria to be considered when quotas are given. Applicants have to meet many other conditions. For example, they need to be able to run the fishing operation which requires significant capital. This means that community organisations, trade unions and materially disadvantaged Namibians will not be able to get fishing quotas. In practice, only businesspeople can benefit.

Sometimes foreign fishing companies appoint famous and politically influential people on their boards of directors. This is principally done to improve their public image but also to obtain better quotas from the government. This has nothing to do with affirmative action and merely constitutes a form of 'window-dressing' and can be seen as a form of 'legal corruption'.

So far, affirmative action in Namibia has been successful in bringing about a more representative civil service. Quotas for women in the local government elections of 1992 have contributed to a better representation of women. However, Namibia still has a long way to go before we achieve equal opportunities for all Namibians. Women – especially black women - are still largely excluded from better paid jobs and decision-making positions. There is still a huge gap in the distribution of wealth and income and affirmative action has done little to address this problem. Unless steps are taken to redistribute resources in favour of the poor, the better-off will continue to be privileged and even their children will be advantaged by having better access to education and high quality jobs.

## 5. The challenges ahead

Despite the improvements made since independence, Namibia continues to be one of the most unequal societies in the world. Affirmative action is unlikely to be the solution to our broader socio-economic problems, but it can be one of the instruments of change. There is a great need to expand affirmative action beyond the workplace although the new law limits the policy to 'employment equity'. It is therefore essential to implement policies aimed at eradicating socio-economic inequalities alongside affirmative action. Such policies should include a systematic programme of land reform, support for small-scale businesses of disadvantaged Namibians, minimum wages for vulnerable workers and policies to narrow the income gap.

In the area of human resources development, affirmative action will have a crucial role to play. It is important to ensure that the policy does not centre around the appointment and promotion of black managers only. We do not doubt that this has to be done to eliminate the legacies of past practices, but we believe that affirmative action must be a more fundamental process of change. In the first instance, it has to eradicate the indirect forms of discrimination and barriers to further education that are still widespread. To give a concrete example: a company might offer a training course in the evening. Workers without cars and workers with domestic responsibilities, especially women, might not be able to attend such courses unless the company offers transport and child-care facilities. These are steps that are essential to take if we want to ensure that disadvantaged people can utilise new opportunities.

Affirmative action should also be implemented when bursaries and scholarships are awarded. In such cases it will not be enough to choose candidates who are black or female, but economic circumstances also have to be taken into account. Given the scarcity of resources and the dire poverty in many Namibian households, it cannot be justified that children whose parents are high-income earners - for example in the management of the civil service - are awarded government bursaries.

In our view, the private sector has to play a much stronger and more pro-active role in the area of human resource development. Instead of lamenting about the lack of skills, it is high time that companies use the human potential at their disposal and develop it systematically through certifiable courses and training programmes. Companies must be prepared to plough some of their profits into training programmes as a future-oriented investment.

Finally, we believe that affirmative action must change the institutional culture that prevails in most workplaces. Classical examples are Namibian companies that are dominated by one group of managers (e.g. white German-speaking males) that operate their 'old boys network', convinced that they are the only ones capable of doing the job. Such people often do not realise the need to change and through their attitudes they keep everyone else an outsider. Affirmative action programmes must address such attitudes and change the way in which such institutions are run. Namibian companies must be

open and tolerant to the various influences that make up the Namibian nation. It is only then that they will be able to fully utilise our human resource potential.

We hope that these remarks will stimulate some debate at this conference and once again would like to thank the organisers for the opportunity to present our views.

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