So investing in youth is a waste of money?

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Abstract
Throughout the Global South, especially in Africa, young people are recognised as the future. At the same time, though, they are often prevented from assuming their rightful role in society. This is also true for Namibia and this concluding essay examines the plight of Namibia’s next generation.

Introduction
Parallel to the struggle for liberation, developments on the international stage were also instrumental in bringing about Namibia’s independence. For example, the holes which appeared in the Iron Curtain in Berlin in November 1989 coincided with Namibia’s first free elections for the Constituent and National Assembly between 7 and 11 November. No doubt, independence was long overdue; a new nation was born. It soon became the favourite among the agencies that had stood by it during the struggle.

In its infancy Namibia was, of course, confronted with a number of challenges, the biggest one being the need to address the gap between a politically and economically privileged minority and a marginalized majority. In other words, Namibia’s first task was to begin to clear away what was left over of segregation and apartheid. Challenges were numerous and enormous: to start with, wealth was very unequally distributed and the overwhelming majority of the population lived in poverty as a result of decades of racism and ‘separate development’. For the same reasons, the illiteracy and unemployment figures, especially in the former so-called homelands, were alarmingly high, as were other poverty- and inequality-related indicators. In Katutura, for instance, like in other urbanized areas, teenage pregnancy rates were soaring, with 80% of the women having a child before their 18th birthday. On top of these problems there was the issue of returning exiles and their families, who had to be reintegrated into a society that had profoundly changed. There was also the general trauma of a low-intensity but prolonged and cruel war.

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During the first years of independence the call to address these challenges was drowned out by the excitement surrounding the newly-found freedoms and by the hope for a better future. Expectations were high as many people believed that political freedom meant that their problems would melt away overnight. This did not happen and although Namibia was gradually changing, for many it was not changing fast enough. Therefore, halfway through Sam Nujoma’s third term of office the Namibian government launched Vision 2030, an ambitious vision of what Namibia should look like in the year 2030 and a framework for the subsequent National Development Plans (NDPs, see elsewhere this volume). It set targets for development, starting with the creation of jobs for the growing Namibian population.

The battle for political independence had been won and the first steps were taken towards creating a sense of Namibian-ness. The implementation of the Policy of National Reconciliation made it possible for all to feel or become part of the new nation, as did Namibia’s liberal constitution which guaranteed basic freedoms for all (see the contributions by Becker and Hancox, both this volume). This notwithstanding, the country was (and is) still confronted with the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, and this hampers or even precludes access to education, labour and resources for a substantial part of the population. And even though the main fault lines may no longer run exclusively between the racial categories invented by colonialism, fault lines nonetheless remain, as do some of the apartheid-era laws and policies that were not repealed at independence.

With the wounds of war still raw and other priorities setting the tone, Namibian youth was not high on the agenda in national or regional politics during those early days. These were dominated by the veterans of the struggle or by the traditional rural elites. As a result, mainstream politics neglected the social and economic challenges affecting young people in Namibia until 1994, when the National Youth Council of Namibia was established with the specific aim of addressing the challenges, opportunities and obstacles facing young people in Namibia, and of fostering among the youth a spirit of unity, national identity, and self-respect. One of the most important tasks of the National Youth Council was to create awareness of the social, economic, political, educational and cultural issues facing Namibian youth. Despite these developments, young people, as a growing segment of Namibian society, remained side-lined in national politics. It was only relatively recently that they have started to mobilise themselves more effectively.

The creation in 2014 of the radical Affirmative Reposition Movement, a group demanding affordable housing and land, is but one example.

The newfound freedom to move about the country without restriction also led to a rush to the cities. This rapid urbanization, fuelled by the prospects of finding better jobs and educational opportunities, has resulted in annual population growth rate in Windhoek of 5%. It is projected that close to 60 percent of the population will live in urban areas by

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Namibian cities, however, were not designed for, nor are they prepared to deal with, such a huge influx. It must also be said that most of these new urbanites are youngsters in the productive stages of life. But the hope of many of finding a better future by moving from rural areas to urban ones is often quickly dashed when they end up in the slums or other informal ('unplanned') settlements. There, they are confronted with unemployment, homelessness and poverty, and, as a result, they often turn to crime in order to survive, which in turn leads to a number of interrelated social and health problems. For instance, there are high rates of alcohol abuse and gender-based violence. HIV-AIDS has also spread rapidly since independence. Between 1996 and 2000, the country witnessed an unprecedented rate of HIV-AIDS-related deaths: a 2004 UNICEF study concluded that in the Omusati region alone, over 200 households were child-headed. Luckily, since 2006 the increased availability of, and access to, anti-retroviral therapy (ART) has resulted in a substantial reduction in the HIV infection rate, and in the number of children orphaned by the epidemic.2

On an economic level, there has been significant progress over the past 25 years, and employment in the private and public sectors has grown. Currently, the government employs 100,000 civil servants and is the largest employer in the country. Namibia is now considered an upper middle income country, with an average per capita income of USD 4,650 in 2010. Still, in the same year, its Gini coefficient hovered at around 0.60, making it one of the most unequal countries in the world.3 Poverty thus remains a major issue for the government. It is currently estimated that 568,418 people (26.9% of the total population) fall below the official poverty line.4 Even if this figure has improved since the turn of the millennium it is still very high, enough to have led the present government under President Hage Geingob to create a Ministry of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare. It was also highly symbolic that in March 2015 the president appointed Zephania Kameeta, a pioneer of the basic income grant, to head this newly created office. That poverty eradication has become the top priority for Geingob’s administration is also reflected in the allocation of the national budget 2015-2016.5

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Widespread poverty has also contributed to the breakdown of traditional value systems and social institutions. Some have attributed this so-called moral decay of society to the fact that today’s youth have enjoyed more formal education than their parents. Be that as it may, Namibia is also experiencing an erosion of the traditional family household due to poverty, a high prevalence of gender-based violence, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and, of course, HIV/AIDS. The most alarming tendency has been what is often referred to as ‘the feminization of poverty’, as women are increasingly burdened with providing for their families. In addition to growing up in pressurized family structures, young Namibians are also growing up in more loosely knit – if not disintegrating – community structures. They often live in crowded houses set in an environment dominated by shebeens and other illicit outlets. In Namibia, it is generally felt that prior to independence young people grew up in societies characterized by collective service, reciprocity, parental guidance and compassionate support.

If you think education is expensive, try ignorance

Given this background, there is an obvious but enormously challenging task facing the education system. Before independence schools were racially segregated and had three main goals: firstly, education served as an instrument of oppression; secondly, it was intended to perpetuate the privileges of the ruling minority; and, finally, it served to reproduce the skills and attitudes required for maintaining a colonial and segregated society.

Prior to 1990, schools practised corporal punishment and pupils were forced to perform nonsensical tasks. The system was characterised by the need to streamline labour recruitment and address the labour needs of the ruling elite. Therefore, pupils beyond grade 7 had to choose (often low-end) technical subjects (such as mechanics) or more general subjects. This strategy – not taking into account the simultaneous racial, class and gender bias of the education system – helped accommodate different student levels and capacities. It also had an urban bias, as students in the rural areas did not enjoy the same opportunities.

As a result, post-independence education in Namibia was reformed to focus on the human resource base more generally, and to promote equitable social and economic development. This has led to the education sector receiving one of the largest shares of the national budget, approximately 24% in 2015–2016.

These long-term investments have begun to yield some dividends as there has been an increase in the number of children enrolled in primary schools (now at about 98% of the total). Nevertheless, the secondary school dropout rate continues to cause concern, as many students fail to progress beyond grade 10. A number of factors have been cited


6 In its original meaning, a shebeen was a place where they sell illicit alcohol. In southern Africa, it nowadays is a generic term for a bar or pub.
for such low graduation rates: many blame the overall quality of the education being offered, a circumstance attributed to a shortage of teachers and/or the lack of teacher training. Teachers and school directors have also been criticised for their lack of vision, dedication and management skills, while parents have been blamed for not becoming involved in their children’s school career (although, given the fact that they usually lack a proper education themselves, this may not come as much of a surprise). The students are also often reproached for being lazy and ill-disciplined.

Despite the measures taken by this and previous governments (such as the strengthening of social grants, increasing the education budget, and installing a Ministry of Youth and Sports) the number of students finishing secondary or tertiary education is still low. During a public lecture in October 2013, Victor Kaulunge, HR Policy adviser at the National Planning Commission (NPC), observed that the drop-out rate among grade 10 pupils was about 32%, while the rate for grade 12 is 10%. In addition, about 20% of grade 12 pupils had to repeat their final year in high school. He also noted that out of 33,000 pupils who wrote grade 10 examinations in 2012, about 10,000 dropped out of school. In a similar vein, there is a disjunction between the country’s education system and its employment needs. Some question whether those who do finish secondary school or university have obtained the appropriate skills and knowledge for the job market.

This is disturbing, especially given that Vision 2030 aims to reduce unemployment from 35% to 5%, to increase per capita income to the level of developed countries, and to grow the manufacturing and service sectors to account for more than 80% of Namibia’s GDP. In an effort to address the challenge of secondary schools and tertiary institutions’ inability to produce the skills needed by the economy, the government recently introduced the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme.

Schools around the country are decaying, in terms of quality, infrastructure and teacher/learner morale. A recent visit to one of our former schools more than 20 years after graduation found it to be in an extremely depressing state, from the boarding rooms, to the class rooms to the dining rooms. By comparison, prisoners at the Windhoek Prison live in better conditions than the pupils in Khomasdal. There was no evidence of the hope and growth one associates with schools. It had become a place of drugs and substance abuse, of violence, vandalism and destruction.

Given these observations about the state of education in Namibia, one must pose the question: Do schools train people for unemployment? The same can be asked about Namibia’s tertiary institutions. As David Namwandi, the then Minister of Education, remarked in 2013, “the courses offered at institutions of higher and further learning should conform to the skills needed in the job market”. However, he also acknowledged

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the fact that the Namibian labour market is too small, “even if the courses are designed 
to be demand driven”.8

Obviously, there is also an important social dimension at play: some parents can afford 
to send their children abroad for further education, most often to South Africa, and 
others have started paying for private schools within Namibia. But children living in 
the townships have little hope of advancing beyond grade 10. In fact, at one school in 
Katutura, only one student out of a class of 30 passed grade 10 examinations (the rest 
abandoned their education). The crisis of grade 10 failure was most pronounced 
between 1999 and 2005, a situation worsened by the policy of refusing learners the 
opportunity to repeat the grade. Did Namibia create a lost generation? It is around this 
time that our Young Achievers youth empowerment project was conceived and launched.

Young Achievers empowerment project

Given these circumstances, one cannot help but assume that the Namibian government 
sees young people as a burden, rather than a blessing. With 70% of Namibia’s popu-
lation under the age of 30, will young people ever be able — or allowed — to contribute 
to the development of their country? If a tree is not watered it will wither and die. Like 
the tree, the young people will not grow and flourish if they are not tended to. It is time 
to invest in youth. It is time to provide Namibian youth with an appropriate environment 
in which it can finally show its true potential.

The time has indeed come to invest in Namibia’s youth — at least, if the plan to become 
an industrial nation is to be taken seriously. And ‘Namibian youth’ means everybody: for 
too long, the focus has been on the 5% who enjoyed success, while the remainder was 
left behind. It is time for the nation to take collective responsibility for the unfortunate 
position in which young people find themselves.

Giving young people hope and vision

As a teenager, I am quite certain that I’m not the only one who has the most undesirable, 
nerve-wrecking, heart-breaking fear of the future

Olavi Angula, Young Achiever

When we established the Young Achievers more than 10 years ago, many of the young 
people in the township were surrounded by apathy and hopelessness. For many, university

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8 Jemima Beukes, “Quality of Education not to Blame for Unemployment: Namwandi”, The Villager, 23-29 
unemployment--Namwandi--> [accessed 27 October 2015]; also see Albertina Nakale, “Vocational 
Education a sure Priority – Namwandi. … But the Time to Deliver is now”, New Era, 7 October 2013, 
October 2015]; Lela, 14 March 2014, “New School Curriculum and Structure for Namibian Schools”, 
<http://www.lelamobile.com/content/13806/New-school-curriculum-and-structure-for-Namibian-schools/> 
[accessed 27 October 2015].
was a foreign concept. Unemployment, *Gomchas* (young women or men who survive on crime) and alcohol abuse were more familiar. For example, the national unemployment rate in 2013 was 27.4%, peaking at 56% for those between 15 and 19 years, and 48% and 33% for those between 20–24 and 25–29 respectively. The majority of young people did not expect to advance beyond grade 12.

Hope, purpose and meaning are crucial for physical and emotional well-being, for goal orientation and the avoidance of anti-social behaviour. For this reason, the Young Achievers empowerment project has focused on three issues: firstly, it seeks to provide young people with a vision and sense of mission in life; secondly, it wants to inspire and motivate young people to become responsible citizens at local, regional, and global level; and thirdly, it aims to support young people in their personal growth. With this focus, the programme set itself the following objectives:

- To make sure that all the young people who participate in the programme make it to university.
- To involve communities and the country in the betterment of Namibian youth.
- To involve young people in the design, implementation and deliverance of programmes and services.
- To create youth clubs around the city and offer safe, diverse, culturally enriching and intellectually stimulating after-school activities.

These goals have driven the Young Achievers project from the start. At the beginning, there was no funding or outside support, but simply a group of young people helping young people. Yet, what we strive for is not small: we want to achieve a paradigm shift in the minds of young people living in the in townships of Windhoek, Rundu, Oshakati, Tsumeb and Walvisbay. It is a shift that the education system has thus far failed to provide.

Over the past years, we have often asked ourselves: if we were teachers, what would we tell our pupils? What would we do — what could we do — to help them become capable of contributing to the development of the country, and eventually to the world at large? In response, we have been sharing information and helping young people build self-esteem; we are helping to develop education that creates independent thinkers; we are informing, networking and connecting youth from around the country; we are promoting reconciliation and developing leadership; and we are exposing young Namibians to the world that lies beyond the borders of Namibia. Most importantly, perhaps, is that the Young Achievers are focusing on transformational leadership in Namibia.

**Conclusion**

The young people of Namibia have come a long way since 1990. At first, they were only considered mere — and often overlooked — participants in development, but now they demand that they be considered active stakeholders in all spheres. Looking at young people and children from that perspective, as citizens, it is important to fast-forward, and ask what kind of life they will have in 10 years’ time? Will he or she be a packer at
Shop-rite, or parking cars on Independence Avenue? Will this young person end up on the streets, living a life of crime? Many citizens do indeed picture the situation thus: youth, women and men in their prime, in their productive age, who have nothing, and have nothing to do. Such is a vision of a society in crisis. And it was this crisis that prompted the creation of Young Achievers, a programme that has changed the lives of many young people by offering them hope and lending them vision: the future leaders of Namibia. So, you think investing in youth is a waste of money? Try not investing. See where it gets you... and us.

Bibliography


