



TUCSIN



## **ELITE EDUCATION VERSUS MASS EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA ?**

### **TUCSIN – CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA**

#### **TUCSIN PUBLIC LECTURE**

THE PROGRESS OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NAMIBIA DEPENDS MAINLY  
UPON THE EXCEPTIONAL EDUCATION OF A PROFESSIONAL ELITE RATHER  
THAN PROFICIENCY FOR THE MASSES ?

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Windhoek

#### Introduction

The purpose of the public lectures and debates that have been undertaken in partnership between “The University Centre for Studies in Namibia” (TUCSIN) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) since the beginning of 2008 (facilitated by Mr. Mike Hill) was outlined in the welcome remarks of Dr. Anton Boesl from KAS as stimulating critical thinking and enhancing the culture of public debate and participation.

Dr Wilfred Bezuidenout, Chairperson of the Alumni Association and a Junior Board Member of the TUCSIN Board of Trustees, pointed out that the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD) has stopped funding the undergraduate programme in Namibia. “In an earlier era, many Namibians, like myself, were accepted at university academically but not financially.” He felt that there should be a civic responsibility to be interested and to contribute to the education of the young – and the old.

Lesley Beake, a visiting guest speaker from Botswana, spoke of her workshop that afternoon in which she provided internet access to a group of San people. She mentioned that she herself had learned to write on a slate: so in a relatively short time-frame, education had moved from the slate to computer-generated technology, which is an extremely powerful tool. She mentioned that members of the public were quite welcome to review the San material from the workshop, which had already been posted on the web at [www.kalaharipeoples.net](http://www.kalaharipeoples.net).

Dr Sandelowsky, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees and a Founder Member of TUCSIN exemplified civic responsibility, adding value to society, in Ms Beake’s opinion. She mentioned a TUCSIN course, tailored for a group of San leaders, which ran from 2002 – 2003, specifically for their needs. Dr Sandelowsky thereafter introduced her

concept of a TUCSIN 'Hall of Fame', a symbolic gesture to recognize former TUCSIN students as role models for the current generation of learners. Certificates were then awarded to this effect to Dr Wilfred Bezuidenhout, who had qualified as a medical doctor; Mr George Ilya Kayamo, who had been helped financially to complete 10 years of study through UNISA and who is a member of Parliament now; and finally, Heidi Schmidt, who had been a scholarship grantee to do Occupational Therapy at Stellenbosch. The pride with which these achievers received their certificates was aptly captured by the line quoted by Mr Hill: "The greatest monument anyone can leave behind is better people."

### Education of the masses versus education of the elite – the arguments

The presentation at this public meeting took the form of a public dispute and debate. The opposition argument was debated by Mr. Nic de Voss, while the proposition argument was put forward by Prof. Joseph Diescho. The two academics' debate proved to be a thought-provoking and intensely enjoyable display of wit.

### The Opposition Argument – Two sides of the same coin

Mr de Voss began by proposing that, in fact, we need both sides of the coin; he felt that the two standpoints were not mutually exclusive, as he hoped to show. Mr. De Voss started his debate by defining the operative terms of the topic of the evening, namely 'proficiency' which he proposed means "Adeptness; expert (in an art or in doing) (Oxford English Dictionary) or Ability; accomplishment; adeptness; competency; efficiency; skillfulness (Collins)". He then argued that this definition indicated that "what must be argued, then, is that the bottom half of society must be uplifted to a level at which ordinary people are able, competent, skilled to perform in a constructive way within society'. Another term which was considered was 'national development', which was taken to include economic progress and political maturity – which are two inseparable concepts. Social cohesion was taken to be the third element which contributes to the success of the society.

What follows is an excerpt of the main arguments put forth by Mr. de Voss.

Which part of society drives 'National Development'? Arguably, the bottom section of society drives national development, providing the skilled manpower to drive a flourishing economy. In the English Industrial Revolution, the Enclosures Act drove hundreds of small farmers into towns where they were forced to seek work in factories. This was the beginning of the drive for political rights and a meaningful democracy. It was also the beginning of trade unionism and the establishment of self-help clubs in which workers tried to educate themselves. We may argue that the same process is happening now in Africa. Urban people are street-wise, exposed to much more than rural people: they acquire education formally and informally; they need to be equipped or to equip themselves because they must operate in the formal economy to survive.

Having a few educated people at the top cannot, in a practical sense, guarantee that their decisions will be made in the interests of the masses. History shows us that a few educated leaders rarely make decisions in the interests of the masses. 1,900 years of European history shows us that the few educated elite are by nature reactionary and

rarely, if ever, make decisions in the interests of the masses. Their motivation is to retain power and influence for themselves. In those days we are considering the monarchy and the aristocratic structures which propped it up.

The African experience since the death of colonialism tends to exhibit the same symptoms: the birth of oligarchies, rule by the few elite, under the guise of a democratic process. Zimbabwe today – particularly since 2002 when Mugabe was seen to have lost the popular vote - is a classic example of an educated elite (11 of his senior officials have now been targeted, with him, as having abused human rights in Zimbabwe, according to the BBC news today). He has been prepared to ruin the economy of his country, starve his people directly and indirectly, abuse the democratic process, simply to maintain power for the few political and military cronies at the top.

- Food Aid has been denied to opposition supporters in the run-up to the recent Presidential elections.
- Thousands of Matabele people were killed by Mugabe's Shona-based special army units, immediately after Independence, though this received very little press coverage at the time.
- Mugabe has been prepared to ruin the country's agricultural economy, including tobacco production, for his private political purpose.
- Those who are computer literate, with an internet facility, must surely have seen the pictures of Mugabe's 'palace' with accoutrements to rival the palace of Versailles in its heyday.
- Mugabe sent his army privates to die in the DRC simply to grab cobalt and other mines for his own private benefit. The national army was used to acquire wealth for the leader himself – not for the benefit of the state

Mugabe is but one African example of other rulers who have behaved similarly: Mobutu Sese Seko and Idi Amin are worthy of mention for the scale of their atrocities against their peoples.

No country can operate democratically, with universal adult suffrage, unless voters are educated to a level where they can cast their votes wisely, they can monitor government behaviour – what we now call 'governance', and they can use the structures available to get rid of bad governments.

We live in an imperfect world so no political process is perfect: democracy seems to be the best we have at the moment, even though this system is flawed and open to considerable abuse by any leader – in the developed and developing world.

A horrifying statistic has been made public this year in the International Index of Human Development, published by The World Bank. Namibians, it would seem, have more democracy than they know what to do with: 70% of those Namibians tested would not mind a single party state or military government.

This means that our current government, if it so wished, could abuse democratic processes, take away rights enshrined in our constitution, promulgate bad or discriminatory laws and most Namibians would not utter a single peep of protest. Namibians, in this survey, are amongst the most naïve of any African country surveyed for this index.

If we consider reality, the current Government is revising certain parts of the Constitution – we do not have much information yet, beyond revising the rights of permanent residents and aliens to enter the country.

If we continue to look at the development of Africa beyond colonialism then two factors become apparent: one is that many rulers and their cronies have enriched themselves with public money at the people's expense; secondly, that people have continued to vote for bad leaders, even when these leaders have ruined the national economy – Julius Nyerere (The Father of African Socialism) and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia are examples of leaders who were allowed to rule for more than 20 years by the will of the people, even though their quality of life declined and national economies were in a state of collapse.

Why were these leaders allowed to cling on to power with the will of the people? The reason is simple: the voters were not sufficiently educated to understand that democracy gave them the power to choose an alternative. The voters were not sufficiently educated to evaluate the criteria for successful leadership and governance. The voters were fearful of change because they were not educated sufficiently to envision a change which could be regarded as beneficial.

The countries in the G8, the most successful countries in the world, have an electorate which is educated to a high degree. If we take the models for our argument from other countries in the world, then it is indisputable that the most successful economically, the most stable politically, the countries in which poor governance is not a big issue, are those countries in which the electorate has been given a high level of education, by the state or by the private sector.

- In Britain all students must remain at school until 16 years old and must write the GCSE, which is considered a school-leaving certificate. In Namibia the acquisition of the NSSC, the equivalent qualification, is a privilege which is not accorded to the majority of the population.
- In America it is not unusual for students to progress from college into universities in their early twenties, so that they start their working lives in mid-twenties.
- Singapore must be the classic case to support our argument: this city state has no natural resources, not even fresh water: it has made people its resource. The government offers a world-class education to its 4, 4 million citizens. 25 places at the Oxbridge universities in England are reserved by the Singapore government for its best students. Singapore is one of the few countries to be attested as corruption-free by the CIA Factbook. Singapore was ruled quite authoritatively but today petty rules have been relaxed, censorship is less strict, and even educated taxi drivers recognize that the government has acted in the best interests of the people.
- Poor governance is not an issue in developed countries which have checks and balances within the infrastructure to ensure the honesty and integrity of the officials of government. Doubtless some corruption still exists, but it is made more difficult. The Scottish Labour MP forced recently to resign springs to mind. However, she was forced to resign: in under-developed countries (including our own) abuses by public officials are made public but little, if any action, is taken against them. We may consider cases in Namibia which have been reported by

newspapers but, as yet, no action has been taken by the Anti-Corruption Commission.

The masses should be educated to a level where people can understand and safeguard their elemental freedoms. Namibia ranked 26 out of 148 countries in the 2006 Press Freedom Index. This is an impressive statistic which will not be repeated since the government is now considering legislation to monitor and control the activities of the Namibian press.

For freedom of speech and expression to be effective, however, one needs a literate population which can have access to information and can process such information in a meaningful way. The Namibian newspaper's page for SMS opinions is a healthy sign that there is currently an honest outlet where people are free to express their views.

The Chartist Movement in C19 Britain understood that its members would not be able to further their political aims unless the members were educated to a level to be effective in the political struggle for rights. All state education involves some degree of propaganda, a bias towards moulding the desired model citizen but in developed countries leaders are no longer fearful of independent thinkers or encouraging such independent thought through the education process. Work by American educationalists to encourage critical thinking is impressive.

Unfortunately, a huge limitation in under-developed or developing nations is the lack of courage or confidence of leaders to allow or encourage freedom of religion or freedom of thought and expression. Deprivation of such rights is a deliberate strategy to subdue and suppress the masses. Of these countries, national development depends upon throwing natural resources upon the world markets, actually exhausting the national inheritance for tomorrow without developing the people to use or benefit from the resource. There is little secondary industry which is developed in consequence.

If the masses are educated then the leaders will automatically be educated. If a state offers a good standard of education to all its people, then the leaders, surely will be among those who benefit from this. America is probably the country which best exemplifies this truly democratic approach to education: the success story of Barack Obama is a case in point. He succeeded to secure the Democratic nomination against the Clinton establishment and connections.

Educating the elite at the expense of the general electorate is a very dangerous practice. There would be very few leaders who would not take advantage of this situation. This would be a return to a monarchy – a system where power becomes entrenched in the hands of a few and the masses are regarded as tools to ensure the perpetuation of national wealth for the benefit of the few.

Part of the problem for Africa is that many leaders are still liberation fighters and are chosen by the people for their sacrifice in the struggle, regardless of their level of education. Some are doing a competent job, even though they have not received a high degree of formal education. Ronald Reagan in USA receives praise in THE HISTORY OF AMERICA as a good President: although he did not have a high degree of education he was willing to listen to experts who were and he chose his advisers wisely. John Major, the British Prime Minister, allegedly a circus performer, was a competent leader of the Conservative Party after Margaret Thatcher in a party where many senior officials,

government ministers were well educated. These two national leaders had been given a proficient basic education but not an exceptional education.

It all comes down to what we understand and accept as 'proficient'. A subsistence farmer may be proficient at survival but he does nothing for national development or that farmer may cast a vote but his criteria for choice would differ profoundly from that of an educated voter: he may choose on tribal lines, nepotism, or for whatever reason.

### The Proposition Argument – Education is for the Elite

Prof Diescho argued that studies of any civilization – from early Chinese, Athenaeum, Biblical times and African civilizations – would indicate that all progress had been the work of a few. Joseph, from the Bible, for example was one of 12 children but his father provided opportunity to only one. Having been sold to the Egyptians, in benevolence, Joseph as the foreigner was given the opportunity to rule.

Change, therefore, depended upon the special education reserved for a few. Jesus chose only 12: he could have included everybody. The Church is a very, very strong establishment but only a few are admitted to seminaries to run the church education. In African terms, Nigeria and Zimbabwe were recognized as offering the best education: in Nigeria one can join the army only with a degree.

Prof Diescho chose to quote Karl Marx, whose opinion of the masses could be described as scathing: "The masses are like a sack of potatoes: they must be carried."

Education has a few criteria worth mentioning: it prepares the human being to be an effective player in society; it also prepares the individual to navigate his own way. Aristotle placed emphasis upon happiness and fulfilment; Plato favoured ethical and moral values. The modern leader, Nelson Mandela, on the other hand, believed in preparing us to be empathetic with the weak and to learn the art of sacrifice.

Namibia, in Prof Diescho's opinion, had 'unleashed' education quantitatively rather than qualitatively. The impact of teachers, in the old days, was severe. Today, a learner may receive tuition from as many as 20 teachers, leaving him confused. Wide streets with narrow perspectives result in lesser minds, he warned the audience. There may be more democracy but less freedom.

The definition of national development was when the greatest number of people could look after themselves in peace – where there is less strife (or striving!) for resources.

The apartheid leader, Strydom, had stated that the best place in the economy for Africans was to fetch wood as labourers. Our own activist, Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, said that he went to South Africa to receive an education to prepare himself (and others) for changes here at home. The few were prepared in this way to return and eventually take over: these were the elite but they were not well educated.

What is more important for the masses is effective training to do certain things. It is better for the masses to acquire life skills. It is a lie to say that we have mass education in Namibia: we have provided education for conformity.

Prof Diescho mentioned the first leader of the first independent country in Africa, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. He was well educated by Jesuits and then received tertiary education in The United States. On a trip to Malaysia he was shocked by the level of under-development in that country, to the extent that he gave the Malaysians money! Ironically, Malaysia's National Development Plan has taken the country to bold new heights while Ghana has gone nowhere – slowly.

The American education system, contrary to popular belief, is about education of the few. Barack Obama was speaking in a white, racist state a few weeks ago and claimed, "I am a recipient of American goodwill. I am running because I am aware of the unlimited possibilities this country has."

A soccer team chooses its members on ability. Not all citizens can play the game of National Development. Bill Gates, Henry Ford and Rockefeller rose to the top because they proved to be exceptional. It is idealism to assume that everybody's potential is the same. Sustainable development – long term – depends upon training a few – who train a few – who train a few. "Only a few people question the way they think. Namibian leaders are the least educated elite. We attend but we do not participate." The resources in Namibia are limited, Prof Diescho admitted, so they should be used discriminately.

In non-democratic societies someone else would choose what I will be. The quality of the leader determined the quality of the followers.

In conclusion, however, Prof Diescho agreed with the starting position of Mr de Vos: that the two polarities offered by the debate need not be mutually exclusive.

Several interesting comments and questions were raised by the audience:

1. It is dangerous to assume that the educated leaders exercise power wisely, as can be seen through the examples of how Africa has suffered from a failure of leadership. Leaders in pre-colonial times contributed to the success of the slave trade by selling their own people.
2. Prof Diescho acknowledged that all people required training for survival. He felt that every region in Namibia should have a sports academy and an agricultural school: "Freedom is not the absence of colonialism; freedom is the presence of purpose – to do something." If change is initiated by one person or a few, then the rest will follow. He quoted as follows: "I fear ignorance in power more than wickedness in informed hands." He also quoted Paulo Ferreira who wrote: "Those of us, who were oppressed before, become oppressors when they are in power." Prof Diescho praised the South African culture of questioning, as proven by the young militants who had ousted Thabo Mbeki: the message sent was "Your time is up."
3. Namibian democracy is about being uncritical: we need to test the views we hold. We can now say what we think; no longer is one arrested for having different views. The 72 people who wrote the Constitution for this country were the elite who decided without consulting the masses. Frankie Fredericks and Michelle McLean both qualify as elite – but not by virtue of education but because of excellence in their respective fields.

## Conclusion

The evening was a great success. The debate in particular opened many minds to the realities of education. Moreover, it exposed the audience to the possible underlying political motivations to education policies.