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NEW AGENDA

SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY

SA can't wait another 50 years

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IFAA Institute for African Alternatives

ISD Institute for Social Development UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE

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Cover: Photos from the South African History Online Archive. IFAA thanks SAHO for its permission to print these photos.

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New Agenda: Where scholarship and public life meet

By Martin Nicol

"Academic work has greater impact when it remains connected to the social world around it."
Professor Robert Balfour, UWC Vice Chancellor

Prof Balfour addresses the event to mark 25 years of publishing *New Agenda: South African Journal on Social and Economic Policy*.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14426/861t9n94

The celebration of 25 years of *New Agenda: South African Journal of Social and Economic Policy* is a symbol of the long-standing partnership between the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and civil society. UWC's Vice-Chancellor and Rector Professor Robert Balfour elaborated on this at an event in Cape Town in May to celebrate the publication of the 100th issue of *New Agenda*: "The partnership between UWC, IFAA [the Institute for African Alternatives], and *New Agenda*, sustained through UWC's Institute for Social Development, forms part of a longer intellectual project.

"*New Agenda* has provided an important platform for progressive public debate in South Africa. UWC's own history belongs to that same tradition of intellectual resistance and critical scholarship. This partnership rests on a shared view that knowledge must be publicly relevant and socially accountable. The 100th edition is significant because it shows *New Agenda* as a space where scholarship stays connected to public life."

All 100 past issues of *New Agenda* are now available as an historical archive[1] on the redesigned IFAA website. The magic of modern technology allows a reader to browse through each issue, page by page, without having to download huge files.

On perusing the new archive, it is clear that IFAA has been intent on fueling progressive public debate; *New Agenda*'s concerns have been overwhelmingly focused on post-apartheid South Africa. The content of the journal is looking forwards from 1994 − with the transition to democracy as the reference point. The commentary and debate have been on the shape and effectiveness of present politics − how these impact South Africa's relationship with the rest of Africa and its standing in international geo-politics − and increasingly on the slow and

disappointing progress with development plans and practice, amid corruption and scandal.

New Agenda's archive is not a comprehensive record of momentum and missteps since 2000 − but it does provide an instructive and now accessible source for historians and analysts.

This editorial was written as we marked the 50th anniversary of the Soweto uprising in South Africa. What has changed − and of course, what has not changed − in South African education over the past 50 years is exactly the kind of progressive public debate *New Agenda* is committed to.

In this issue of *New Agenda,* we focus on the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC), which was formed in response to the crisis in education that emerged after the historic 1976 uprising. We publish a review of a new book, titled *From education crisis to organisation: Reflections on the NECC (1985-1995)*. Launched timeously in June at the University of Cape Town, the review was written by former Dean of Education at Stellenbosch University, and prior to that at the Cape Technical College of Education, Professor Maureen Robinson. We also publish selected excerpts from this important book.

Another book review in this issue is written by Bruce Kadalie on Palestine and its historical relationship with Africa. *Rising for Palestine: Africans in solidarity for decolonisation & liberation,* edited by Raouf Farrah & Suraya Dadoo, links the current narrative on the genocide in Gaza with the first genocide of the 20th century − by Germany in Namibia.

Also in this issue, Andrea Pietrafesa and Anne Schroeter highlight how unresolved controversies on land theft and colonial oppression impact today on a planned project by German and Namibian investors to generate green hydrogen in the desert close to Lüderitz.

The 'just transition', a backdrop to the article on Namibia, is also the focus of the academic article in this issue. Katrina Lehmann-Grube, Julia Taylor, and Khwezi Mabasa examine the concept of social ownership and how it has re-emerged in recent years in South Africa within the context of the just transition − a move to sustainable energy provision which does not destroy communities that presently depend on fossil fuels. They argue that interventions must extend beyond the renewable energy sector and require an economy-wide transition which addresses inequality, poverty, and unemployment.

On a lighter note, your editor was approached by a thoughtful older friend who suggested he might put his name forward as a possible candidate for the local government elections due in Cape Town later this year. This would be in one of the wards for which *New Agenda*'s founding editor, the late Prof Ben Turok, served as an elected Member of Parliament for the ANC. The reply was an immediate, but grateful, negative. The ANC has reportedly completed its (still confidential) selection of its mayoral candidates for the upcoming elections. In an unusual move, candidate selection was not restricted to paid-up ANC members with unbroken membership histories (as was the case in the past). In April 2026, the ANC unrolled a new process to headhunt "capable mayoral candidates from across society".

ENDNOTES

[1] The complete New Agenda archive is now available online at https://ifaaza.org/new-agenda-publications/. A separate index of article authors, titles, and page numbers from New Agenda 1 to New Agenda 100 is available on request from production@ifaaza.org. Following an agreement with the University of the Western Cape (UWC) to co-publish New Agenda in 2023, and starting with the publication of New Agenda 92 at the end of the first quarter in 2024, the online home of the journal is on UWC's publishing domain at https://epubs.ac.za/index.php/newagenda

Understanding social ownership in context

Towards a just transition in South Africa

The concept of social ownership has re-emerged in recent years in South Africa, mostly as part of the discourse on the just transition. It's become part of the mainstream narrative and its definition has been loosely defined to apply to various types of ownership. In this article, KATRINA LEHMANN-GRUBE, JULIA TAYLOR and KHWEZI MABASA redefine the concept to fit the historical and political economy context.

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Understanding social ownership in context:

Towards a just transition in South Africa

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Abstract

The concept of social ownership has re-emerged in recent years in South Africa within the context of the just transition. The term has been mainstreamed into policy discourse; however, it typically includes a wide range of ownership types, even including private ownership. This risks the dilution of its meaning. This paper aims to define and situate social ownership in its historical and political economy context, both generally, but also in South Africa.

We argue the key characteristics of social ownership include a collective ownership structure, the pursuit of public benefit, democratic control of decision-making, and an ethic of cooperation or solidarity. Therefore, worker ownership, cooperatives, and public ownership can be considered types of social ownership. Despite the renewed interest, social ownership models are not new in South Africa. There are contemporary and historic examples from which we can draw lessons and experiences.

While many of these social ownership models have successes in pursuing public good outcomes, they have also all faced challenges in achieving democratic governance, benefit-sharing, and financial sustainability.

The key indicator of a successful social ownership model is its public benefit and social return. While the resurgence of social ownership has been applied almost exclusively to the renewable energy sector, a just transition requires an economy-wide transition which addresses fundamental challenges to South African society, such as inequality, poverty and unemployment.

Introduction

The concept of social ownership has re-emerged in recent years in South Africa within the context of the just transition. Various policies and frameworks have mainstreamed the term as a means of achieving justice in the low-carbon transition. In the Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET IP) (Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2022), social ownership is put forward as a means to address the extreme levels of wealth concentration and inequality in South Africa, through "broadening ownership of productive assets" (p. 196).

The inclusion of social ownership in plans and policies for a just transition has long been called for by civil society, particularly trade unions. In 2012, the National Union of Metal Workers in South Africa (NUMSA) put forward a 'Motivation for a Socially Owned Renewable Energy Sector' (NUMSA, 2012). Here, social ownership is interpreted as "genuine public ownership and democratic control of energy". This was written as a direct critique of the private sector's renewable energy programme announced a year earlier. In their call to action, NUMSA put forward support for renewable community energy cooperatives, democratically controlled renewable energy parastatals, and municipal-owned entities, and the use of high-potential renewable energy land under public and collective ownership, all as examples of social ownership of renewable energy.

There is a burgeoning literature examining existing and potential models for social ownership in South Africa in the context of transition but mostly restricted to the renewable energy sector (Cherry et al., 2023). Cherry et al. (2023) define social ownership as "pro-poor and pro-people programmes based on human need" (p. 9). With this, they identify numerous existing examples in the South African context. These range from community ownership as part of the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producers Procurement Programme (REIPPPP), [1]

crowdsourced private investments, Eskom mini-grid projects, cooperatives selling to the municipality through feed-in tariffs, and numerous other mini-grids facilitated by non-governmental organisations, donors, and research institutes.

A feasibility study on 'Community-Led Socially Owned Renewable Energy Development' conducted by Sustainable Energy Africa (2022) examined many of the same examples as Cherry et al. (2023) and conducted a study on energy use and access in low-income households. Many of these examples are community-led, rather than community-owned, or simply represent small-scale alternatives to electricity provided by the state, which serve a population the size of a 'community'.

In many of these reports, social ownership covers almost the full range of ownership models. For example, the JET IP lists "state ownership at different levels (for example, municipalities), employee ownership, co-operative ownership, citizen ownership of equity in private companies or vehicles, individual ownership, and collective ownership (and management)" all as examples of social ownership (Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2022, p. 196).

Cherry et al. (2023) include a similar list but exclude individual ownership. While the breadth of the term allows for the inclusion of many different alternative models being piloted in the renewable energy space, there is also a risk that its meaning is diluted, with some even including private ownership, fundamentally contradicting a common understanding of social ownership. This is representative of the broader private-sector led approach being pursued within the JET IP (Olver, 2026).

Therefore, this article aims to define and situate social ownership in its historical and political economy context, both generally, but also in South Africa. It is structured as follows: after the introduction, section 2 examines the definition and types of social ownership, section 3 explores

a brief history of social ownership, section 4 examines social ownership experiences in South Africa, and section 5 concludes.

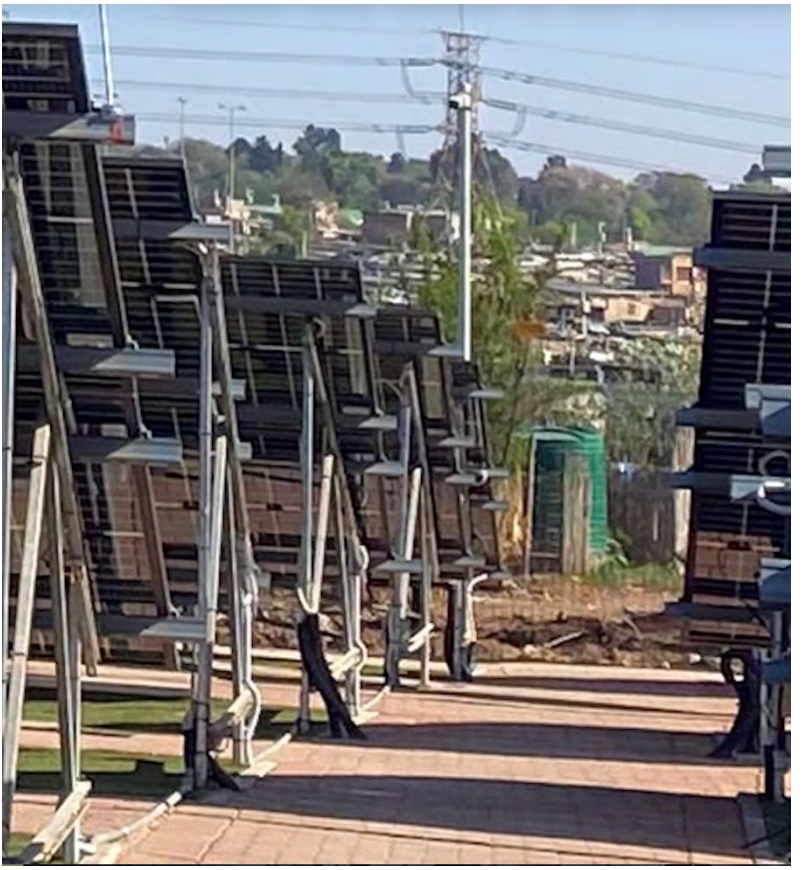
Defining social ownership

Despite its widespread use within South Africa's current context, there is relatively little academic literature on 'social ownership'. This is potentially because various terms can be used to describe a similar concept, including collective ownership, communal ownership, popular ownership, public ownership, socialism, and so on.

The common understanding of social ownership is that it represents a form of ownership which is collective (not individual) and often has a mandate for public benefit. But to understand social ownership, we must first understand ownership. Ownership has legal, philosophical, economic, political, and ethical dimensions. Traditionally, ownership is considered to be about a relationship which people have to an object. This relationship defines their rights to that object, for example, the rights to use, to make decisions over, to sell or transfer, to dispose of, to reap benefit from, and to destroy. In the South African legal system, to own something means to have the most comprehensive set of rights someone can have over an object. It includes the rights to possess, use, enjoy, exclude others, and even destroy one's property, with some limitations (Maseko, 2020).

In the Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET IP), social ownership is put forward as a means to address the extreme levels of wealth concentration and inequality in South Africa, through "broadening ownership of productive assets".

However, in the Marxist tradition, it is emphasised that "ownership is a relationship among people that is concealed behind people's relationships to things" (Iasin, 1985, p. 49), because it is fundamentally about the relationship between those who own and those who do not. Those who own property are able to exclude others from using or benefitting from it. This is a foundation of capitalism and of unequal concentrations of wealth.



The contrast between old and new, rich and poor, development and underdevelopment: A solar mini grid in Johannesburg adjacent to a housing settlement.
Photo: Katrina Lehmann-Grube

Ownership rights are enacted with three main criteria. First, one should have a title deed − some kind of legally recognised confirmation of ownership. Second, one should have operational control (or decision-making) over the entity. Third, one should have the right to access the profits or benefits stemming from the entity (Cocutz, 1953; Willoughby & Fignole, 2023).

A definition of *social ownership* in line with the above definition of *ownership* should therefore include: 1) The legal right to the entity must be allocated to a collective such as a group of people or a group of representatives such as the state; 2) operational control or decision-making about the entity must be made by a collective or the state; and 3) a set of rules should determine rights to access the benefits of ownership. The rules of decision-making or benefit distribution are often established through a government, board or council (Cocutz, 1953).

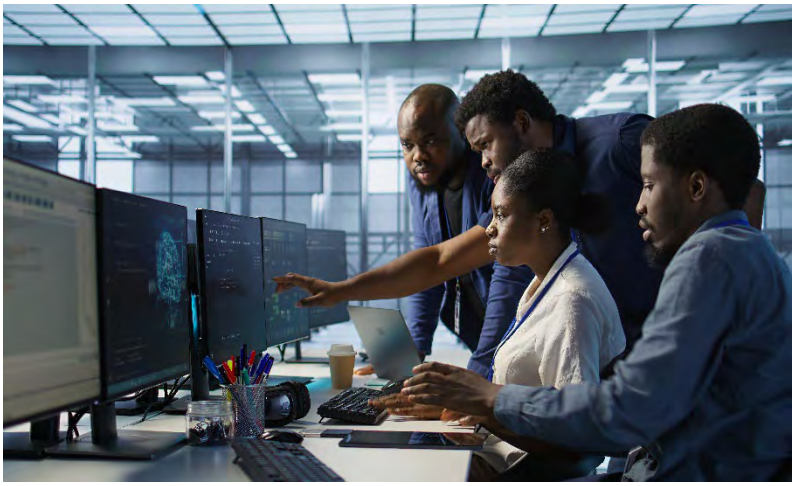
The literature on social ownership does not provide a coherent definition, but based on the definitions of ownership above, and drawing from a broader project by the authors (Lehmann-Grube et al., 2025), which includes interviews and case studies, we identify four criteria which define social ownership.

The first criterion of social ownership is collective ownership − which means that an entity is owned by a grouping of people whom it serves or that an entity is owned by a body which represents such a grouping (such as a state) (Cocutz, 1953; Willoughby & Fignole, 2023). The types of ownership which meet this criterion are cooperatives, public ownership, and municipal ownership. Collective ownership is by members who are also the recipients of the entity's services.

The second feature of social ownership is the focus on public benefit or social returns, rather than profit maximisation (Minns, 1996). These social goods can include improving access to public goods,

decreasing inequality, ameliorating ecological degradation, transforming economic structures as well as experimenting with alternative development paradigms. The types of ownership which meet this criterion include public ownership, municipal ownership, cooperatives, and not-for-profit organisations.

The centrality of democratic and participatory decision-making governance is the third feature of social ownership (Minns, 1996). Cooperatives have a clear mandate to ensure participatory decision-making, so they meet this criterion. Public and municipal ownership models should also meet this criterion, but the realities of state decision-making processes make this uncertain. This may depend on the constitution of a country and the political party in power. National government entities often lack a direct approach to participation, which can mean that elites in policy-making end up making decisions (Sebola, 2016). Local government is seen as more conducive to participatory decision-making but has also faced severe criticism in the South African context (Maphazi et al., 2013).



Social ownership meets the criteria of democratic, participatory decision-making. Photo: Shutterstock

Providing renewable energy to a rural school.
Photo: Flickr

The fourth feature of social ownership includes a commitment to solidarity and cooperation. This feature is arguably most possible in public ownership, municipal ownership, cooperatives, and not-for-profit organisations, as those who are profit-seeking are usually in competition.

Typically, worker ownership, cooperatives, and state ownership are considered the main forms of social ownership, although they may each have limitations in achieving all the mentioned criteria in practice. Public-private partnerships, an open-investment model, and a split ownership model cannot be considered social ownership based on these criteria. Non-profit organisations meet two of the four criteria: public benefit and solidarity and cooperation.

Cooperatives are arguably the clearest form of social ownership as they easily meet all four criteria. Cooperatives are a well-established type of organisation which has a set of principles which are laid out by

the International Cooperative Alliance (2017): voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training, and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for community.

Public and municipal ownership meet the criteria as their main function is to provide social benefit (and not profits), they should be based on solidarity and cooperation, and they are governed by representatives of democratically elected governments. However, they have faced criticism for their ability to support democratic and participatory decision-making.

History of social ownership

Ownership over the means of production is a defining feature of different economic systems. Capitalism is defined by its labour relations, with a class that owns the means of production, and those who receive a wage for their labour. Private ownership, institutionalised with legal private property, is a defining feature of capitalism, and can be connected to the high levels of inequality across the world (Atkinson, 2018). Therefore, social ownership has always been part of socialist and communist movements as it addresses one of the core tenets of capitalism. Due to its association with socialism, the concept of social ownership was used much more historically.

Social ownership was particularly prevalent in the former Eastern Bloc. The former Yugoslavia[2] had well-developed theory and practice on social ownership. It formed the basis of their socio-economic system and defined the relations of production (Maksimović, 1983). This was based on the fundamental principle that, according to the country's 1963 constitution, the "means of production" should be a "common and inalienable foundation of associated labour" and "man's labour shall be the only basis for acquiring the products of social labour and the basis for

managing the social resources" (Maksimović, 1983, p. 157). In this case, social ownership took the form of worker councils, "in which workers fulfil directly or equally their social-, economic- and self-administering rights, and decide on issues dealing with the socio-economic situation of the organization" (Papajorgji & Alikaj, 2015, p. 47).

The function of social ownership in this system was three-fold: 1) To produce enough goods, of a high enough quality, to satisfy the material needs of society; 2) to enable every member of society to develop their capabilities; and 3) to stimulate producers to offer the largest and most rational production. Yugoslavia was very distinctive in this model, as social ownership in other parts of the former Eastern Bloc was largely in the form of centralised state-ownership and collectivisation.

The ownership of the means of production by the state, or public ownership, was not only popular in the former socialist states. Public ownership was prevalent in many other parts of the world, in the form of nationally owned enterprises which were common after the Second World War (Cumbers, 2021). While this was mostly advocated for by more left-wing parties (such as the UK's Labour Party), public ownership was also used as "an instrument for promoting social and political unification, securing national defence and related strategic considerations, in some instances for promoting economic growth" (Millward, 2011, p. 377). This can explain how public ownership was prominent even in countries without strong socialist pressures, such as the US and Japan. Public ownership saw significant declines globally during the period of neoliberalism, with the privatisation of many state-owned enterprises and the decline of the public sector (Schmitt & Obinger, 2015; Toninelli, 2000).

With the development of varieties of 'African socialisms' in the 1960s, socialist principles were merged with African economic and philosophical traditions. A key component of this was the concept of communalism, which is widely argued to be a cornerstone of many

African philosophies, in contrast to the individualism of the West (Ikuenobe, 2006).

Instead of viewing the individual and the community as separate entities, this perspective recognises that they are mutually supportive. Individuals are expected to contribute to the broader community, which in turn enhances their own well-being (Ikuenobe, 2018). Kwame Nkrumah linked communalism and socialism. He argued that "[I]n socialism, the principles underlying communalism are given expression in modern circumstances … it is a form of social organisation that, guided by the principles underlying communalism, adopts procedures and measures made necessary by demographic and technological developments" (Nkrumah, 1967).

As with other varieties of socialism, ownership over the means of production remained central. For example, the Tanganyika African National Union's (TANU's)[3] Policy on Socialism and Self Reliance highlights the importance of social ownership: "The way to build and maintain socialism is to ensure that the major means of production are under the control and ownership of the Peasants and the Workers themselves through their Government and their Co-operatives" (Nyerere, 1967, p. 3).

Various forms of African socialism did not advocate solely for state ownership but also included cooperatives. The mainstream Western model of cooperatives, however, is generally traced back to the mid-19th century in England with the formation of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers. This was a society formed specifically in response to the exploitative nature of work and capitalism during the Industrial Revolution. Therefore, "the cooperative model of economic organisation was seen as the only viable means to protect the collective interests of the poor and vulnerable" (Okem & Stanton, 2016, p. 17).

The Rochdale Pioneers established the Rochdale Principles, which formed the basis of the modern cooperative principles put forward by the International Cooperative Alliance (International Co-operative Alliance, 2017). These models were introduced to Africa during the colonial period and were often "treated as instruments for propagating public economic and social policy" (Develtere et al., 2008, p. 11). However, they have evolved in the post-colonial period, which has allowed for the cooperative movement to become more about the needs and desires of the members (Wanyama et al., 2009).

The history of social ownership has been shaped by macroeconomic factors. In many of the historical examples discussed, social ownership formed a fundamental part of how the state organised a country's production, resources, and labour. Today, social ownership models often occur, or are promoted, as smaller-scale supplements to more dominant private ownership. As such, state, market, and society power relations throughout history determined how social ownership models were formulated and designed (Williams, 2014).

This can be summarised under three different approaches. In the first, the state is responsible for creating a conducive regulatory environment, which allows organisations with a social mandate to operate autonomously. These organisations include non-profit organisations, self-help and mutual aid groups, cooperatives, and corporate social responsibility institutions. Social ownership in this context aims to remedy market imperfections, without requiring increased state interventions that restructure economies, so they produce more beneficial social outcomes.

In the second approach, the state's role advocates for the transformation of economic structures through state policy tools. These tools include public ownership, state-coordinated industrial policies, comprehensive competition regulations, public procurement strategies,

and oversight of financial capital deployment. This approach utilises state policies to develop and support social ownership models, thereby altering resource allocation, investment patterns, ownership structures, and market dynamics.

The third approach is more transformative. It advances a case for using both social ownership and state policy levers to establish alternative development models. This approach relates social ownership to questions about indigenous community rights, the transformation of global economic imbalances, racial redress, and the decolonisation of knowledge systems. These models are positioned within the context of developing anti-capitalist socio-economic principles. Consequently, the state's role in this context is supporting diverse social ownership structures, which present transformative alternatives to market-led development strategies.

With the development of varieties of 'African socialisms' in the 1960s, socialist principles were merged with African economic and philosophical traditions.

Social ownership in South Africa

In South Africa, there are examples of all types of social ownership. Limited space here precludes a full analysis of these experiences, which are varied and diverse in sector, historical time frame, purpose, and scale. Rather, in this section we briefly illustrate some of the ways in which social ownership has been pursued in practice in South Africa, to what ends, with what success, and with what limitations.

One of the criteria for the definition of social ownership is a focus on public benefit. Here solar energy has been introduced to upgrade amenities in a rural settlement.

Different social ownership models have been pursued for national strategic and developmental objectives (e.g. state-owned entities [SOEs] such as Eskom, Transnet, the Post Office, etc.), to address the legacies of apartheid (e.g. Communal Property Associations [CPAs]), for achieving economies of scale (e.g. agricultural cooperatives), to address economic exclusion and unemployment (e.g. cooperatives, including those established by unions), and as forms of community solidarity and support (e.g. stokvels).

The democratic government inherited hundreds of state-owned entities from the apartheid government who used them "to expand the white Afrikaner middle class through affirmative action, build businesses through favourable procurement, provide jobs for the unemployed and rollout infrastructure in white areas" (Gumede, 2016, p. 69).

Public ownership was part of the liberation agenda from early on, with the call for nationalisation of key industries included in the Freedom Charter[4] and included in the ANC's early policy doctrine. However, this quickly changed after 1994. SOEs became a major site of political and economic contestation between different factions of the state, business, and trade unions in the post-apartheid era, with further influence from international agencies like the World Bank (Gumede, 2016).

The first decade of democracy saw a new framework for the restructuring of SOEs, which resulted in many being privatised, corporatised, and some essential services being outsourced at the local level. In many cases, these were unsuccessful, with the companies being liquidated or resulting in such high tariff increases that many people could no longer afford the services. Gumede (2016) argues that rather than creating competitive companies, privatisation resulted in inefficient and unregulated monopolies, many of which required state bailouts after collapsing.

In the last decade or so, SOEs have suffered huge declines with many reporting year-on-year losses. This has been attributed to the severe impacts of the economic slowdown and the slump in the metals price, leaving these entities with large debt servicing costs on investments made during the boom (Makgetla, 2020). SOEs have also been a key site of state capture (Chipkin & Swilling, 2018). The systemic breaking apart of SOEs and the siphoning off of public funds for private gain has perverted their role for public good and their social ownership mandate and ethos.

CPAs[5] were established in the post-apartheid era in response to the land dispossession of apartheid and colonialism. CPAs are legally recognised and legislated modes of collective land ownership, in which defined communities legally own land and manage it under democratic governance and a written constitution. The CPA model came out of a long

history of activists, lawyers, and land users workshopping and considering the best ways to manage restituted land in the new South Africa, aimed at balancing communal rights with individual and family rights (Weinberg, 2021). Despite these efforts, CPAs have become a cut-and-paste model that has rarely been adequately fitted to local contexts and has faced numerous difficulties.

The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development's CPA Annual Report cites issues with membership, limited management and governance skills, and corruption and crime as the biggest challenges facing CPAs. Other work has also cited a lack of government support and oversight, the exclusion of women, youth, and labour tenants, and conflicts amongst members (Weinberg, 2021; Hall 2009; Lahiff, 2009). This has raised the question of whether the role of CPAs is limited to land restitution, or whether they can or should "play a role in correcting the wrongs of South Africa's exclusionary property system as a whole" (Weinberg, 2021, p. 16). Additionally, while CPAs were instituted to address issues of land ownership, they necessarily became enmeshed in the economic livelihoods that people derive from land which has produced complex outcomes, with limited impact on improving individual well-being (Hall, 2009).

South Africa's cooperative experience is hugely varied. During apartheid, agricultural cooperatives played an outsize role in the economy and were vital in supporting white farmers, ensuring the economic success and sustainability of white-owned agriculture businesses (Amin & Bernstein, 1995; Satgar, 2011). According to Ortmann & King (2007), agricultural cooperatives were used in: "1) the purchase and sale of agricultural inputs and equipment; 2) the purchase, storage and subsequent sale of agricultural commodities; and 3) transport services" (p. 24). In addition, white farmers were supported with access to land, credit, and the services of the marketing boards. Towards the end of

apartheid, the liberalisation of the agricultural sector and removal of subsidies meant these cooperatives lost a lot of their institutional power and cooperative nature, and many were ultimately converted into profit-oriented firms. Given the ways in which these models were used to entrench and uphold the apartheid state and white supremacy, Satgar & Williams (2012) argue that "emulating the Afrikaner empowerment approach does not engender genuine cooperative development but rather abuses the cooperative form for perverse forms of economic development" (p. 202).

Public ownership was part of the liberation agenda from early on, with the call for nationalisation of key industries included in the Freedom Charter and included in the ANC's early policy doctrine.

There has been a concerted effort in South Africa, including by the state, to develop cooperatives to boost local economic development and broader participation in the economy. However, some have argued that these efforts have not been particularly successful (Okem, 2016). In 2010, the Department of Trade and Industry reported that most cooperatives set up had failed due to a lack of understanding of how cooperatives are governed, dependence on donors, and a lack of business opportunities and marketing skills (Okem, 2016).

Trade unions have also played a significant role in promoting cooperatives. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the National Union of Mineworkers established a cooperative programme in response to layoffs which retrenched tens of thousands of workers. Kate Philip's (2018) analysis of this programme tracked some of its challenges − labour over-supply, inadequate investment in operational needs, failures in

conducting adequate market feasibility studies, and weak governance and management.

By far the most prevalent form of social ownership in South Africa, in terms of active involvement, are stokvels. Stokvels are group savings or credit associations, where members contribute a fixed amount at regular intervals and subsequently can draw money at set times or intervals (Lukhele, 1990). Estimates suggest that up to 11 million South Africans are members of at least one stokvel (NASASA, 2025), with historically more women than men participating (Verhoef, 2001). Depending on their purpose and the way the rotation and payments are structured, stokvels may be used for big life events (weddings, births, and most commonly, funerals), annual spending (festive season, school fees), times where large investments are required (buying furniture, house building), emergencies, or simply subsistence and groceries (Irving, 2005). Research on stokvels shows that they are an essential form of community-building, solidarity, wealth pooling, and survival for many communities, especially economically marginalised ones (Verhoef, 2001; Matuku & Kaseke, 2014). They provide key sources of credit and social security for those excluded from formal financial institutions (Verhoef, 2001; Dube & Pretorius, 2020), or where these institutions are considered untrustworthy or too expensive (Irving, 2005).

All these social ownership models do have successes in pursuing outcomes of public good. But they are also plagued by many of the same issues. Across the board, social ownership models face challenges with implementing democratic and good governance. This is as true for SOEs as it is for cooperatives and CPAs, albeit for different reasons and at different scales. Yet, democratic governance and involvement in decision-making is fundamental to the principle of social ownership and the stated objective and functioning of these models. These weaknesses have in turn made many organisations susceptible to elite capture, and a means of

concentrating or siphoning off wealth, resources, or control to an elite group. Challenges also exist in terms of who is included and excluded.

Who gets to be included in a 'community' can be defined by exclusionary principles or practices, leading to conflicts amongst members, disputes over benefit sharing, and even at the level of the state, over who has a right to claim access to services (Sobuwa, 2025). And lastly, many of these models face issues of financial sustainability, particularly those reliant on external funding rather than internally driven mechanisms (such as stokvels).

The difficulties faced by social ownership organisations is not only due to their internal challenges, but is also linked to the environment in which they are expected to operate − limited access to finance, competition from monopoly corporates, a poor educational and skills development framework, and a neoliberal system which has systematically pressured the corporatisation of all kinds of social ownership models (Satgar & Williams, 2011).

And yet these models persist, sometimes through their own resilience and the persistence of communities, other times because they remain the best model we have despite these difficulties, or sometimes because their strategic and developmental importance remains (Makgetla, 2020). And their social good should not be minimised − Eskom led the electrification of millions of Black households and continues to play a redistributive function (Department of Minerals and Energy, 2001), stokvels provide solidarity and informal mechanisms of social security and credit access for millions of people, and CPAs provided access to land for those previously dispossessed, just to name a few.

Solar mini grid, Johannesburg.
Photo: Katrina Lehmann-Grube

Conclusion: Social ownership and inequality

The concept of social ownership cannot be allowed to be diluted to the point where it no longer holds any meaning. And it should not be used as a residual response to the privatisation and corporatisation of South Africa's transition. In this article, we have put forward a definition of social ownership that aims to challenge some of the policy discussions that have diluted its meaning and potential. We argue the key characteristics of social ownership include a collective ownership structure, the pursuit of public benefit, democratic control of decision-making, and an ethic of cooperation or solidarity. We have discussed different models of social ownership, outlined the history of the concept, and considered the way in which it has already been practiced in South Africa, with all its flaws.

Social ownership models are not new in South Africa. There are contemporary and historic examples from which we can draw lessons. Many of these are also directly relevant to the transition. CPAs may host renewable energy projects and earn rents (e.g. Droogfontein Pty Ltd, 2026); mine worker cooperatives may be directly impacted through the transitions in their sectors; SOEs such as Eskom are clearly central to the decarbonisation of our electricity supply; municipally-owned renewable energy projects are becoming more prevalent in large metros (Evans, 2024), and the stokvel model is even being used to develop community-owned solar sources (Pakati & Molelekwa, 2025).

Rather than seeing social ownership as something new within the just transition, we should consider the ways in which the principles of social ownership within these organisations and models can be strengthened and held accountable. It is important that the state plays an active role, both by pursuing social ownership directly, and by creating a conducive macroeconomic and policy context which ameliorates the structural barriers facing these models.

The key indicator of a successful social ownership model is its public benefit and social return, but we should be transparent and cognisant about their challenges in practice. A lot is asked of social ownership systems. They are expected to redistribute wealth and resources, provide services, correct historical wrongs, build community and solidarity, while at the same time being financially sustainable, efficient, and democratically managed. This is a tall order, in the context of high inequality, almost no economic growth, an unsupportive international financial and institutional architecture, and the entrenchment and expansion of capitalist modes of production. However, these goals remain worthy, including in the context of climate change and the transition. And they cannot be left to the private sector, because they remain as pertinent as ever and capital will not prioritise these objectives.

While the resurgence of social ownership has been applied almost exclusively to the renewable energy sector, a just transition requires an economy-wide transition which addresses fundamental challenges to South African society, such as inequality, poverty, and unemployment. The underlying objectives of social ownership for deconcentrating wealth and ownership over the means of production mean that it can be applied much more broadly to achieve a more just and equal society.

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ENDNOTES

[1] REIPPPP was announced in 2011 and was the first large-scale renewable energy programme in South Africa, as well as the first introduction of significant private generators of electricity. It is a competitive auction process whereby private companies bid to produce electricity using various technologies (mainly wind and solar). The selected bids then enter into 20-year contracts with Eskom who has to buy the electricity at the set price.

[2] The state of Yugoslavia was formed in 1918, becoming the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1963. It was made up of six republics including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. The federal state started dissolving in the early 1990s with the Yugoslav wars, and each state is independent as of 2006.

[3] TANU was the foremost liberation party of the former Tanganyika (now Tanzania). It was formed in 1954 by Julius Nyerere who later become the first President of independent Tanzania.

[4] "The mineral wealth beneath the soil, the Banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole" (Freedom Charter, 1955).

[5] There were also other forms of collective land ownership both historically and presently – such as community trusts and land ownership committees (Weinberg, 2021). However, here we focus on CPAs as one particularly significant model of collective land ownership established specifically to address the land dispossessions during apartheid.

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Dateline Africa

Africa Diary 1 March to 31 May 2026

A selection of events from the continent that are significant or interesting, or both

Compiled by the New Agenda Editorial Collective at the Institute for African Alternatives
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14426/fm5jdg57

May

22 May: The new Museum of West African Art (MOWAA) announced the arrival of the Drum magazine West African archives. Over 1,000 editions from Ghana and Nigeria, dating between 1954 and 1983, will be curated and made publicly accessible. This follows a partnership with the Bailey African History Archives, well known for its digital archive of Drum magazine. Born in South Africa in 1951, Drum was a defining publication of its time, documenting the social, political, and cultural life of postcolonial Africa through bold journalism and photography, shaping a generation of writers, artists, and readers across the continent. MOWAA is based in Benin City in southern Nigeria, and its programmes include heritage-related research and preservation initiatives on the continent.

18 May: Public transport operators staged demonstrations across Kenya against government moves to increase fuel prices. As usual for Kenya under President Ruto, protests quickly turned violent. Demonstrators erected burning barricades and looted businesses. Security forces responded with tear gas, live ammunition, and mass arrests. At least eight people died. The US war against Iran has driven up fuel prices across east Africa, which depends on the Gulf for oil supplies.

5 May: The RightsCon[1] 2026 Summit, a global conference on digital rights, governance, and innovation, due to be held at the Mulungushi Conference Centre in Lusaka, Zambia, was suddenly cancelled by the Zambian government, ironically one of the joint hosts. The Zambian government denied it had pulled the plug on RightsCon because of pressure from China. Promoted as "the world's leading summit on human rights in

the digital age," the previous RightsCon summit in 2025 was held in Taipei, Taiwan. Taiwan ranks 28 on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index. Zambia is number 77 and China 178 (third last). The venue for the conference was refurbished by Chinese contractors in 2022. The Chinese Ambassador to Zambia, Li Jie, stated at the time that China would assist Zambia to hold international events.

A view of the newly completed ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria. Top right: Chinese Ambassador to Nigeria Yu Dunhai and the ECOWAS Commission President, Omar Touray, at the handover ceremony on 28 April 2026.

April

28 April: In another example of "infrastructure diplomacy," the Chinese government formally handed over a new US$57million headquarters complex to the West African regional intergovernmental organisation, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Abuja, Nigeria. Three suites will be vacant: those for Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. All run by military juntas, they withdrew from ECOWAS to form their own regional Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2024 − after construction on the complex had begun. China has funded, designed, and built more than 200 government and public buildings across Africa, including the African Union (AU) headquarters in Ethiopia, parliament complexes in Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, foreign ministry annexes in Ghana and Kenya, as well as conference centres, museums, hospitals, and stadiums.

26 April: South Africa's Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies made the embarrassing acknowledgement that his department's Draft National Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy contained fictitious sources in its reference list. He said that AI-generated citations were included without proper verification. The policy was withdrawn "with humility".

24 April: The latest report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) showed that Algeria maintained its ranking as the biggest military spender in Africa (and the 20th globally) at US$25.4billion. This is slightly more than the combined military expenditure of *all* the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SIPRI, 2026). Dr Mohamed Ibn Chambas, a Ghanaian politician who is a member of the SIPRI governing board, is currently the AU High Representative for 'Silencing the Guns'.

Fighter in Sudan. *Photo:Wikimedia Commons*

22 April: *The Economist* described the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a ruthless contender in the civil war in Sudan, as "a transnational business-cum-military empire". The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the national army, and the RSF began the conflict in April 2023. This is now the biggest war in the world today. More than 33 million of Sudan's 50 million people require aid. At least 19 million face acute hunger. Some 14 million have fled their homes and perhaps hundreds of thousands have been killed. The RSF holds half the huge country and hires mercenaries from across the world, partly using revenues from Darfur gold mines. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) denies being the RSF's chief foreign backer. The AU seems powerless to act as neighbouring countries such as Chad, Libya, and Ethiopia, as well as Kenya and Uganda, give space to RSF activities. Egypt and Eritrea support the opposing SAF.

March

25 March: The United Nations (UN) General Assembly passed a resolution spearheaded by Ghana, which described the historical transatlantic trafficking and enslavement of Africans as "the gravest crime against humanity" and called for reparations (UN, 2026). In 2025, the AU extended its existing focus on reparations for a decade, covering the period from 2026 to 2036. The President of Ghana, John Mahama, is the AU Champion for Reparations. He introduced the motion at the UN.

Republic of Ghana President Denis Sassou Nguesso at his inauguration. Photo: Flickr

17 March: President Denis Sassou Nguesso (82) of the Republic of the Congo won a fifth consecutive term, with 95% of the vote, in the 2026 presidential election. He is the third longest ruling leader in Africa, behind President Teodoro Obiang Nguema (83) of Equatorial Guinea and President Paul Biya (93) of Cameroon.

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ENDNOTE

[1] See https://www.rightscon.org/about-and-contact/

New Agenda is looking for contributors to our regular 'Dateline Africa' column

This is a selection of news briefs from across the continent that are significant, interesting, or both. Content is drawn from existing published sources and must be rigorously accurate and provably fact-based. The column aims to include positive news from Africa to challenge the conventional dystopian views and share news and information that is not widely published in the mainstream media.

Entries must have a specific date, can be a single sentence or a paragraph, and should be approx 50-100 words. The column includes 10-15 entries and is about 500-1,500 words.

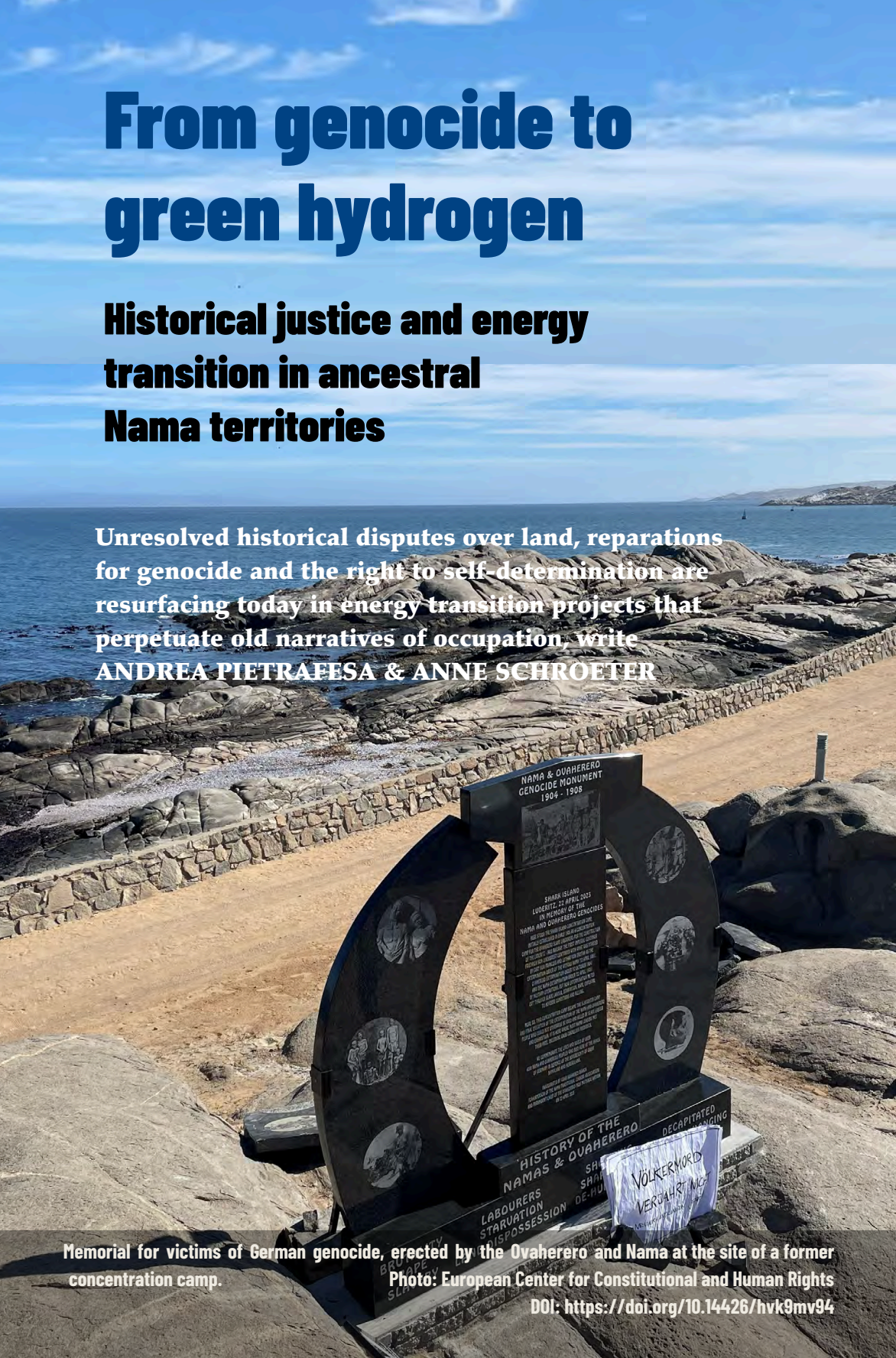
Each column covers three months and must be submitted to the New Agenda Editorial Collective two weeks before publication date, which is at the end of each quarter. The New Agenda team, which has been compiling the diary until now, is open to suggestions and innovation, as long as they reflect the ethos and objectives of the publisher, the Institute for African Alternatives. The diary is not subject to editorial approval, beyond the usual copyediting, and the author is invited to put his or her stamp on the column.

Email us at production@ifaaza.org with your first proposed diary entry.

From genocide to green hydrogen

Historical justice and energy transition in ancestral Nama territories

Unresolved historical disputes over land, reparations for genocide and the right to self-determination are resurfacing today in energy transition projects that perpetuate old narratives of occupation, write ANDREA PIETRAFESA & ANNE SCHROETER



Memorial for victims of German genocide, erected by the Ovaherero and Nama at the site of a former concentration camp.
Photo: European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14426/hvk9mv94

Introduction: history, territory, and a recurring debate

In southern Namibia, contemporary debates over renewable energy and a just transition are taking place on territory marked by a history of colonial violence, forced displacement, and political exclusion. To understand current controversies surrounding the 'Hyphen' green hydrogen project in Tsau||Khaeb National Park, it is necessary to go back several centuries and examine the historical relationship between the Nama people and their land as well as the ruptures caused by German colonial occupation and genocide in the early 20th century.

The Nama people historically inhabited a vast area known as Great Namaqualand, which extends from the Fish River Canyon to the Atlantic coast in areas of present-day southern Namibia and part of South Africa. Since at least the 14th or 15th century, these territories have been used seasonally for grazing in a continuous network of movement between summer and winter pastures. Nama communal life was based on goat herding, hunting, detailed knowledge of water sources — springs, rivers, and wells — and the use of medicinal plants and minerals.

Starting in 1652, European colonial expansion from the Cape gradually pushed the Nama northward toward the Orange River. In the 18th century, Nama leaders like Jakobous Fredericks consolidated settlements such as Khouigandis, now known as Bethanie, establishing political, agricultural, and technical structures that strengthened Nama territorial control. This order was violently interrupted by German colonisation, which reached its darkest period between 1904 and 1908 when the German *Schutztruppe* (protection force) and settlers committed the first genocide of the 20th century against the Nama and Ovaherero peoples. The genocide and associated crimes exterminated 50% of the Nama population, many of them killed on Shark Island, where the Germans maintained a concentration camp between 1905 and 1908.

Genocide, colonial spatial reorganisation, and contemporary inequality

The genocide perpetrated by the German empire was not limited to military violence. It included a profound reorganisation of land, economy, and access to resources. Large areas were transformed into farms for European settlers, exploited by German colonial companies through mining concessions, and closed off through exclusion zones. One of the most significant was the so-called *Sperrgebiet* (restricted area), which was created in 1908 to protect German diamond mining interests and meant the expulsion of the indigenous Nama populations.

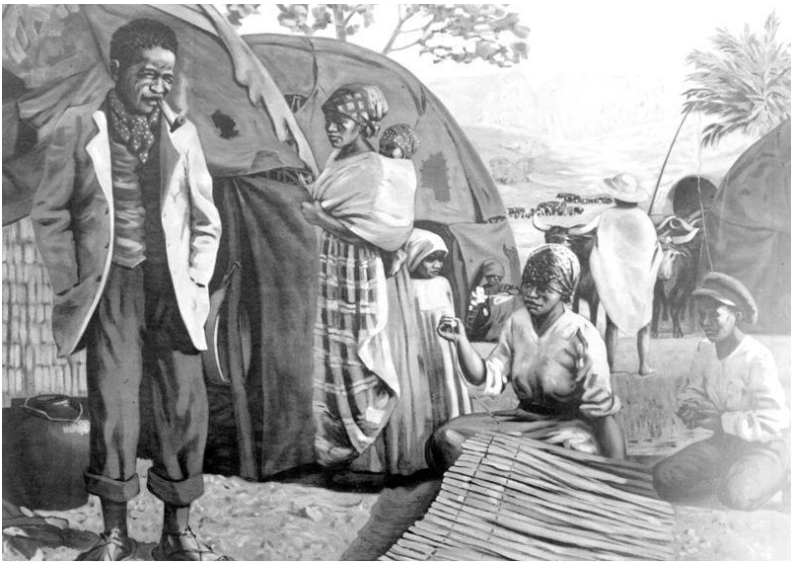
This territorial regime did not disappear with the end of German colonial rule in the area. The restricted area was maintained throughout the 20th century with concessions granted to other mining activities before it was eventually converted into the current Tsau||Khaeb National Park in 2008. Although the area was renamed and is now presented as a conservation area, the fundamental principle of indigenous exclusion remains intact. Surviving Nama communities and their descendants have never regained control or access to these territories, despite their deep historical and cultural connection to them.

Tsau||Khaeb National Park spans roughly 26,000 square kilometres with an Atlantic coastline of roughly 600km. Of this coastline, only a limited area of 50–60 square kilometres around the town of Lüderitz, including Shark Island and Angra Point, are publicly accessible. The remaining coastline and park are inaccessible to the Nama people and the public — however, mining and tourism concessions remain active.

The effects of structural dispossession remain visible in present-day Namibia. Historical and legal records document how indigenous access to land was progressively restricted through fraudulent treaties, forced removals, establishment of "native reserves", and administrative

measures. These policies laid the foundation for a deeply unequal political economy in which Nama communities were — and are to the present day — marginalised and excluded from land and from the material means to sustain autonomous lives.

Today, this history explains why many Nama communities continue to face high levels of economic precarity and dependence on informal labour. Nevertheless, the Nama people retain political organisational structures and capacities inherited from their ancestors who survived the genocide, which has enabled a string of political mobilisations in response to decisions affecting their territories. Land restitution and territorial recognition remain politically sensitive issues in Namibia, despite their centrality to historical justice.



Nama family in German South West Africa between 1906 and 1915. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, from the German Federal Archive

Between 2015 and 2021, the German and Namibian governments negotiated a reconciliation agreement, the so-called 'Joint Declaration',[1] which recognises Germany's historic responsibility for the genocide and commits to supporting the Namibian government with development aid

worth 1.1 billion Euro over a period of 30 years. From the beginning of these negotiations, Nama and Ovaherero descendants of the victims of the genocide and other colonial crimes demanded direct participation in the negotiations, reparations, and acknowledgement of the genocide by the German government not just from a historical point of view, but also legally. Nama and Ovaherero descendants, together with civil society actors in Germany, have advocated for strengthening the rights of victims of international crimes, including when they were committed during colonialism, and for general awareness in Germany of its own colonial past and atrocities.

Nama family in German South West Africa, between 1906 and 1918.
Photo: Walther Dobbertin, Wikimedia Commons, from the German Federal Archives

The genocide perpetrated by the German Empire was not limited to military violence. It included a profound reorganisation of land, economy, and access to resources.

Energy transition and new forms of extractivism: renewable energy projects threaten biodiversity hot spots in ancestral Nama land

It is against this backdrop that current green hydrogen and renewable energy projects have emerged in Great Namaqualand. The Hyphen project seeks to construct and operate a green hydrogen facility that will export ammonia worldwide. Hyphen Ltd. is a company registered in Namibia with shares held by the German renewable energy company ENERTRAG SE and the British investment firm Nicholas Holdings Ltd. The German government is supporting this project by considering granting it the status of a "strategic foreign project".[2] This would facilitate access to funding as well as provide support for the Namibian government in setting up regulatory frameworks and other infrastructure that would be necessary for the country to enter the hydrogen market and export ammonia.[3]

Hyphen Ltd.'s infrastructure is being developed across a 4,000 square kilometre area in Tsau||Khaeb National Park, and it includes solar plants, wind parks, desalination plants, electrolysis and ammonia storage facilities, and associated infrastructure needed to operate and maintain the project.

Tsau||Khaeb National Park is a site of exceptional global importance. It contains 90% of Namibia's Succulent Karoo Biome — the world's only arid biodiversity hotspot and one of just 36 biodiversity hotspots globally. These ecosystems not only harbour extraordinary levels

of endemism but also contribute to carbon storage and climate regulation. As emphasised by Namibia's Chamber of Environment, (2024), large-scale hydrogen development threatens one of the last near-pristine arid wilderness areas on Earth.

Despite clearly defined protection zones in the Park Management Plan (Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, 2020), hydrogen concession areas were allocated without regard for these safeguards. Even areas categorised as having "lower" conservation status are known to support levels of biodiversity and endemism beyond those of many European protected areas. In this extremely fragile desert environment, ecological restoration is exceptionally difficult, and plant translocation frequently fails. Any large-scale industrial disturbance would therefore cause irreversible damage that cannot realistically be offset elsewhere. The proposed Hyphen project must be assessed in light of these permanent ecological risks.

The impact would not be limited to terrestrial ecosystems. Hyphen Ltd. is proposing major industrial infrastructure at Angra Point — the only publicly accessible section of the coastline — to serve as an ammonia export terminal. The peninsula is a key biodiversity area that provides a habitat for endangered seabirds, migratory wetland birds, whales, dolphins, Cape fur seals, and brown hyenas.

Angra Point is also located within the Benguela Upwelling System, one of the world's most productive yet environmentally sensitive marine regions. This coastline is shaped by cold, nutrient-rich upwelling, persistent fog, strong winds, and episodic low-oxygen events. While these conditions sustain remarkable biological productivity, they also render the ecosystem highly vulnerable to additional stress.

Further compounding these risks are the planned desalination plants. For every litre of freshwater produced, approximately 1.5 litres of heated, hypersaline brine mixed with chemical residues are generated.

When discharged into the ocean, this dense effluent can settle on the seabed, suffocating marine organisms and jeopardising small-scale fisheries and oyster enterprises.

Taken together, the extensive infrastructure required for Hyphen's hydrogen project poses severe and irreversible threats to terrestrial, coastal, and marine ecosystems. At the same time, it risks compounding long-standing injustices experienced by the Nama people.

Presenting the hydrogen project as "green" and sustainable ignores the impacts on cultural heritage and the indigenous rights of Nama communities.

Environmental racism: neocolonial extractivism and human rights

Promoted as part of an energy transition necessary to address the climate crisis, this project (falsely) promises investment, employment, and economic growth for Namibia. However, for many Nama communities, it also evokes continuities with the past. As highlighted, the territory designated for the Hyphen project is not "empty" or "neutral" land available for development and exploitation. It is an ecosystem of deep historical and cultural significance for the Nama people, including a desert and coastal areas of global ecological significance classified as biodiversity hotspots.

The combination of declaring land a national park for the purpose of environmental conservation, foreign investment by the former colonisers, and "green development" narratives while excluding the indigenous land owners reproduces a colonial logic familiar to the Nama and indigenous peoples more generally: decisions made without their meaningful participation as economic and other material benefits are

concentrated outside their territory and people and social costs are borne by indigenous communities and local residents. Presenting the hydrogen project as "green" and sustainable ignores the impacts on cultural heritage and the indigenous rights of Nama communities. This pattern is frequently observed in modern extractive projects: green transition narratives overshadow historical justice (see Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2025), silently reproducing exclusion under the guise of sustainable development.

From a political-economic perspective, the key question arises: can the energy transition be just if it is built on land dispossession that was never addressed? Without land restitution and territorial recognition, the green transition risks becoming a new phase of colonialism, now legitimised by the language of sustainable development.

…can the energy transition be just if it is built on land dispossession that was never addressed? Without land restitution and territorial recognition, the green transition risks becoming a new phase of colonialism.

Addressing colonial continuities and resisting "green" extractivism

Since April 2025, the Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA), together with the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), Forensic Architecture (FA), the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP), and the Minority Rights Group International (MRG), has undertaken advocacy to highlight violations of Nama indigenous rights and the Hyphen project's wide-ranging impacts. These efforts seek to enforce the Nama's right to be consulted and to give or withhold free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) for developments on their ancestral lands, in line with human rights and environmental standards and the principles of a just energy transition.

In September 2025, the German energy giant, RWE, terminated its memorandum of understanding to purchase ammonia from Hyphen Ltd. for export to Europe. This followed a letter sent on 2 April 2025 (and later made public) by the NTLA, together with the STP, ECCHR, FA and MRG, and an intervention at RWE's Annual General Meeting on 30 April 2025 urging the company to withdraw until the Nama's right to FPIC and environmental rights are fully respected.[4]

In October 2025, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights included in Germany's 2026 periodic review specific questions on its extraterritorial obligations related to hydrogen production abroad. These address:

1. Measures to secure FPIC of indigenous peoples affected by green energy projects on ancestral lands and

2. Steps to prevent violations of the right to a healthy environment and to biodiversity arising from German-backed green energy projects or companies operating overseas.

On 19 November 2025, after an official visit to Germany, Surya Deva, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development, issued a

statement on his preliminary findings.[5] He emphasised that renewable energy projects "within or beyond Germany" must not bypass human rights and environmental safeguards, stating that "renewable energy should also be responsible energy". He cited the green hydrogen project in Great Namaqualand as a key example, noting the absence of FPIC and risks to cultural rights and biodiversity.

Looking forward: a just and decolonial transition

Events and developments in Nama territory show that climate justice and historical justice are deeply intertwined. A truly just energy transition cannot be limited to reducing emissions and attracting (foreign) investment. It must address structural inequalities inherited from colonialism and recognise indigenous communities as rights-holders. Such projects cannot come at their cost and must include them.

In this case, this includes, among other measures, fully acknowledging the genocide and its consequences, securing land restitution, ensuring effective participation of indigenous and other affected communities, and linking climate policies to processes of truth, memory, and reparations. Ultimately, the situation faced by the Nama people reminds us that decisions about energy and ecosystems are not just technical or economic. They are profoundly political decisions that reflect the ways that societies confront their past and determine who has the right to make decisions about the future.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Initialled in May 2021, amid some controversy, the Joint Declaration was produced by seven United Nations Special Rapporteurs following their joint communication with the governments of Germany and Namibia on violations of international law and reparations for colonial crimes. See https://www.rosalux.de/news/id/50359/logische-konsequenz-neuverhandlungen

[2] A strategic foreign project in Germany is awarded by the federal government to international initiatives that promote German or European interests, with a focus on addressing climate challenges, renewable energy and securing critical raw materials.

[3] See https://enertrag.com/projects-show-cases/featured-projects/hydrogen-projects/hyphen-project-for-green-hydrogen-in-namibia and https://hyphenafrica.com

[4] See https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Publikationen/20250430_RWE_AGM_EN.pdf

[5] See https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/11/germany-un-expert-urges-government-show-leadership-promoting-rights-centred

BIOGRAPHIES

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Solidarity in an age of complicity

A book that refuses to wait

All the contradictions, confusion, and inconsistencies in Africa's complex relationship with Palestine surfaced at a gathering in Cape Town in May 2026 to launch *Rising for Palestine: Africans in Solidarity for Decolonisation & Liberation*. But this was not your typical book launch, according to BRUCE KADALIE, who was there. It was part a call to action, part a challenge to conventional academic scholarship, and part a celebration of the global solidarity that an event of this kind is a part of.

Read the review of the book at https://doi.org/10.14426/a7p1cz07

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14426/ry1zh571

There are book launches that function as polite literary salons, and then there are gatherings that feel like war councils. The launch of *Rising for Palestine: Africans in Solidarity for Decolonisation & Liberation* in Cape Town on 18 May 2026 was emphatically the latter. Co-hosted by the Institute for African Alternatives, Surplus Radical Bookshop, and the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign, the event was billed as the book's first launch on African soil. Professor Usuf Chikte of the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign introduced the co-editors − Suraya Dadoo and Raouf Farrah − for what unfolded as a combustible mixture of intellectual rigour, political urgency, and the kind of raw emotion that only emerges when literature is not merely describing history but trying to interrupt it.

But if the audience expected a sombre, grief-stricken affair, they were quickly disabused. What emerged over the course of the evening was a bracing, sometimes uncomfortable conversation about complicity, contradiction, and the unfinished business of decolonisation − not as metaphor but as material practice.

The key interventions by Dadoo and Farrah and in the audience Q&A discussion revealed both the strengths and the fault lines of contemporary Palestine solidarity in Africa.

Setting the scene: a night of competing calendars

The evening opened with what seemed to be an apology for logistical friction. Professor Chikte immediately announced a pending interruption of the proceedings: "I need to warn you, I have to leave at 7:30 for a radio interview on the flotilla." News had recently broken that the Spring Global Sumud Flotilla had been illegally intercepted by Israeli forces in international waters and six South African were among the hundreds of activists abducted and taken off to prison in Israel. It also emerged that the book's co-editor, Farrah, was on the central committee of the Global Sumud Flotilla and had travelled from Algeria that very

morning. That flotilla was not a side note but a parallel text running beneath the evening's proceedings. Here the personal was not merely political, but also practical, urgent, and mobile.

This opening exchange could, in retrospect, easily be a parallel for the book's animating tension: that solidarity is not a sentiment but a set of material infrastructures, often precarious, often under direct threat. Dadoo shared her dry run that day with the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) for upcoming events. Chikte talked about the recent successful Nakba Day at the Castle in Cape Town featuring union leader Zwelinzima Vavi and reported that a few days earlier 114 young learners watched a film about the 16 June 1976 uprising. These were not just an exchange of pleasantries, but evidence of an ecosystem of activism and organising that the book both emerges from and seeks to strengthen.

Chikte's praise for the book was specific: "I really like your book. It would be great if we could segment it into digital parts." Dadoo responded, "I have the book saved as a PDF in parts. I can send each part to you." Herein lay the small but significant understanding that the 320-page print volume, for all its heft, would not reach the TikTok generation. As Dadoo later put it, with brutal honesty: "We are dealing with the TikTok generation. Younger people have a short attention span because of social media." The discussants, in other words, were already imagining the book's remediation, its own fragmentation into teachable, shareable, mobilisable units.

Raouf Farrah's opening: the vacuum and the vision

When Farrah finally arrived − delayed, exhausted, having "been travelling since Saturday" − his opening remarks carried the weight of someone who had crossed not just continents but historical epochs. He began not with the book but with a tribute: "I want to pay tribute to one

of our authors, Muzan Alneel, who sadly passed away a few weeks ago. She was a Sudanese revolutionary and thinker. She wrote a chapter on the role of media in whitewashing the situation in Sudan." In retrospect the mention of Sudan − a country that has been enduring its own catastrophic war − might be taken as a quiet reminder that the collection's subtitle, *Africans in Solidarity for Decolonisation & Liberation*, is not abstract, that the very thread of the book veers towards the material and the 'grounded'.

Farrah then articulated the book's origin with precision: "During the peak of the genocide in Gaza, we felt shocked and broken. We thought we had to do something. Most literature connecting Africa and Palestine focused on South Africa and the parallels between apartheid and Israel. There was a vacuum. The idea of this anthology came from that vacuum." Yet these parallels, and South Africa's clear and brave foreign policy stance on Palestine, he said, is what motivated him and Dadoo to choose this country as a staging ground for the book's launch.

That word "vacuum" is worth pausing over. Farrah was not claiming that no one had written about Africa-Palestine solidarity. On the contrary, he traced a lineage back to the 1945 Pan-African Congress in Manchester, where "the fathers of Pan-Africanism put the Palestinian question at the heart of the agenda". He cited the 1960s and 1970s solidarities between resistance movements in Cameroon, Algeria, and Lusophone countries, and between the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the ANC. He noted, with gravity, that "the Palestinian declaration of independence was announced in Algeria in 1988".

What had been lost, Farrah argued, was not the history itself but the political language through which that history could be activated. The 1978 Camp David agreements, he said, "softened the language around the Palestinian cause. Palestine was no longer treated as a decolonial question but as a peace-building question." The African Union, he lamented, still "mechanically repeats the two-state solution that has not worked for over

70 years". The vacuum, then, was discursive and political: a collapse of analytical categories that had rendered Palestine a humanitarian problem rather than a structural one.

The book deconstructs the liberal version of history and at the book launch Farrah was performing that deconstruction live. When he said, "We wanted to shine light on these hidden stories that were obscured," he was not engaging in antiquarianism. He was reclaiming a vocabulary − decolonisation, settler-colonialism, armed resistance − that liberal peace-building frameworks had deliberately evacuated.

Suraya Dadoo's intervention: the anti-African elephant in the room

If Farrah provided the historical sweep, Dadoo supplied the uncomfortable specificity. Her opening remarks contained a sentence that hung in the air like a challenge: "As South Africans, I say with shame that the anti-African sentiment in this country is disturbing. I hope this book speaks to that moment."

This was not a conventional book launch observation. Dadoo was naming something that solidarity events often elide: the persistence of xenophobia in South Africa, directed primarily at fellow Africans, even as South Africa positions itself as the moral leader of Palestine solidarity. The book, she made clear, would not allow that contradiction to fester in silence. By including voices from Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Uganda, the collection was deliberately decentring South Africa. "South Africa is widely regarded as one of Palestine's strongest supporters," she acknowledged, "but it was important that the conversation not be dominated entirely by South Africa".

This was not modesty. It was a political argument about the dangers of hegemonic solidarity − the tendency of the most powerful

movement actor to mistake itself for the whole. Dadoo's work with Pan-African Palestine solidarity movements outside South Africa had taught her that "we need Kenyan, Congolese, Ghanaian and Namibian voices talking about Palestine in an Afrocentric way". The book's contributors included Jephta Nguherimo on Namibia, Zahid Rajan on Kenya, the Palestinian ambassador to Cte d'Ivoire, Basem Naim from Hamas, academics such as Shahd Hammouri and Maha Abdallah, and Saleh Hijazi from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

The range was deliberate. The book refused to perform the tidy closure that academic volumes often mistake for rigour. Instead, it holds contradictions in tension: celebrating South Africa's International Court of Justice (ICJ) case against Israel while noting, as Roshan Dadoo's chapter does, that "South Africa is still a major supplier of coal to Israel".

The book's architecture: five movements, one enemy

Farrah's walkthrough of the book's structure was a superlative exposition in political pedagogy.

Part I, *Legacies of Violence*, draws direct lines from the Namibian genocide (1904-1908) to Gaza. Referring to Nguherimo's contribution, Farrah noted, his chapter is "a devastating personal history: his great-great-grandmother died of hunger during that genocide; his great-grandmother survived to tell of concentration camps on Shark Island." This is not analogy. It is continuity − the same settler-colonial logic, the same carceral technologies, the same dehumanising grammar applied to different populations at different moments.

Part II, *Solidarity and Resistance*, contains an interview with Dr Basem Naim of Hamas. Farrah's framing was careful: the chapter "starts not by instrumentalising Palestinian suffering but by clarifying its coordinates from an African perspective". This distinction matters. Too much solidarity literature, Farrah implied, uses Palestinian suffering as a

mirror for Western guilt. This book instead asks: what does Africa's own history of anti-colonial struggle teach us about how to stand with Palestine?

Referring to Part III, *Africa–Israel Collaboration*, Farrah said of Kribsoo Diallo's article, he "writes about the transfer of surveillance technology from Israel to African authoritarian regimes to suppress civil society. Suraya [Dadoo] wrote on Christian Zionism and how faith has been weaponised for the ideological project of Greater Israel." The book amplifies this aspect, noting that "occupied Palestine effectively functions as an open-air laboratory for Israel to test surveillance technology before selling them to repressive regimes around the world in exchange for diplomatic favours".

Part IV, *Reimagining Liberation*, turns toward the future. Hamza Hamouchene writes on the genocide in Gaza: "What is unfolding in Gaza is not merely genocide: it is also ecocide" while Rosebell Kagumire centres Pan-African feminists as "the unsung backbone of solidarity movements".

'Apartheid: Wrong in South Africa, Wrong in Palestine.' How then do we make sense of support for Israel in Africa? *Photo:Sumweekly.com*

The Q&A session: fault lines and clarifications

The question-and-answer session revealed the book's ambitions and its limits. The first questions, "What is Africa?" "Who is Africa?" were deceptively simple. Farrah's response traced a political economy: structural adjustment programmes, US pressure, Israel's "massive courting strategy" that saw Africa as "54 UN votes". But the more revealing answer came later, when an audience member asked about the unity (or lack thereof) between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa on Palestine.

Dadoo's response was admirably granular. "On the issue of reversing Israel's observer status at the African Union, North Africa and Southern Africa were aligned. East and West Africa were on the other side." She then offered a regional breakdown: in West Africa, Pentecostalism has made supporting Israel "a Christian duty"; in East Africa, Israel has positioned itself as "a security partner because of terrorist attacks in Kenya," with the effect that "Palestinians are equated with terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab"; Southern Africa remains strong on Palestine solidarity, "except for Malawi which has a Christian Zionist leader".

This regional specificity is precisely what the book promises. But the Q&A also revealed a tension. When an audience member said, "In my community, solidarity with Palestine has been framed as an Islamic issue, not a universal human problem," Farrah's response was clear: "That is not my vision. The Palestinian cause is a human cause. It is beyond faith and ideology." Yet moments later, he referred to a UN speech by the late PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, about "free monotheism" and distinguished between "settler-colonial Jews from Europe" and Jews who are "Palestinians". Universalism, in other words, was not a blank secularism but a particular conception of religious pluralism rooted in anti-colonial nationalism.

The most charged exchange came around Hamas. An audience member raised the claim that "Hamas is a terrorist organisation with corrupt leadership worth billions". Dadoo did not flinch. She read from her interview with Basem Naim: "He said that like Hamas today, African liberation movements were falsely accused of terrorism. Houari Boumdine, Patrice Lumumba, Dedan Kimathi, Nelson Mandela were all labelled terrorists and hunted down. Their colonisers called on the world to vilify them." Farrah added a note of caution: claims about Hamas leadership's wealth "are often part of Israeli propaganda designed to discredit resistance movements".

Readers of this book looking for a diversity of perspectives on, say, the ethics of armed resistance, could find it one-sided, and the authors' response could be said to confirm this. The book does not pretend to be a 'balanced debate'. It is a rather a declaration of alignment. Whether that is a weakness or strength depends on what one believes the task of political publishing to be.

The regional question: why Africa has not united

One of the evening's most illuminating exchanges concerned the paradox of African UN voting. Dadoo noted that "many countries that have open partnerships with Israel still vote in a pro-Palestine way on most resolutions". Uganda, while strongly influenced by Christian Zionism, "usually supports resolutions critical of Israel". Nigeria and Ghana do the same. An exception is Judge Julia Sebutinde from Uganda. The lone ICJ judge who voted against the majority in South Africa's case against Israel was, Dadoo noted, publicly disavowed by her own government.

This paradox − pro-Palestine votes coexisting with deepening Israel-Africa military and economic ties − is the book's central puzzle. Farrah traced it to the 1990s and early 2000s: "The failure of the Arab revolutions in 2011 to succeed and transition countries into rule-of-law democracies was hampered by the same forces that support Israel today."

The result, he said, is that "the Palestinian cause can no longer count on any Arab country".

The evidence was chilling: "The Sumud Convoy from Mauritania and Algeria through Tunisia is now stopped in Libya at the entrance of Sirte by a military force threatening to kill them if they continue. Forty or fifty years ago, it would have been unthinkable for Arab regimes to threaten peaceful citizens bringing aid to Palestine," said Farrah.

The question that hung in the air was ... whether the solidarity it maps and calls for can be organised at the scale the moment demands.

Conclusion: a book that demands action

The final word belonged to the book's logic. Paraphrasing Farrah, to speak of Africa–Palestine solidarity is to confront a world structured by violence: Gaza's rubble, Sudan's humanitarian crisis, Congo's plundered mines − all reveal the imprint of empire in its many facets.

The book launch was not a celebration. It was a summons. Farrah and Dadoo had come to Cape Town not to sell books but to build a movement. Their book, as Francesca Albanese recognised in her endorsement, is "a long-awaited and much-needed publication" − but only if "long-awaited" is understood as passive waiting. *Rising for Palestine* is not a book to wait for. It is a book to act on.

The question that hung in the air as the audience dispersed was not whether the book succeeds as scholarship − by any measure, it does − but whether the solidarity it maps and calls for can be organised at the scale the moment demands. The genocide in Gaza continues. The

complicity of African states deepens. The youth, as Dadoo noted, scroll through TikTok, their attention fragmented, their political education mediated by algorithms designed to distract.

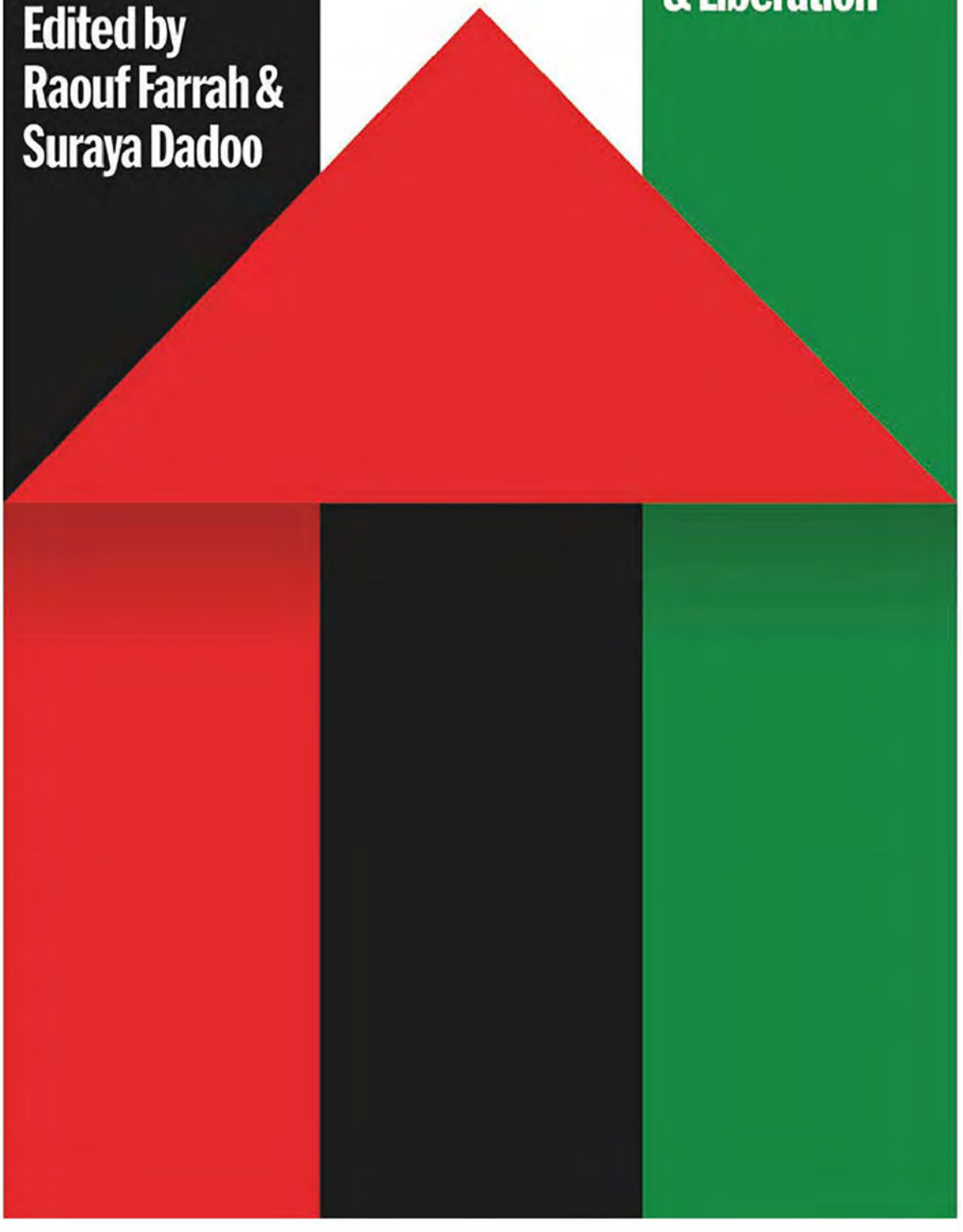
Yet the evening's concluding vision was rather more sanguine. It was the Sumud Convoy: bodies in motion, ignoring borders, refusing the lie that some lives matter less than others. The book launch was, in its own small way, another convoy − not of trucks but of ideas, crossing checkpoints of indifference and active hostility. Whether those ideas will find purchase in the universities, the pulpits, and the streets of South Africa and beyond is now a question left to those with the energy and motivation to activate and organise.

Bruce Kadalie is IFAA's Forums and Events Co-ordinator.

Rising for Palestine

Edited by
Raouf Farrah &
Suraya Dadoo

Africans in
Solidarity for
Decolonisation
& Liberation



Rising for Palestine

Africans in solidarity for decolonisation & liberation

Edited by Raouf Farrah & Suraya Dadoo

Review by Bruce Kadalie

Pluto Press, 2026, 320 pgs, R360.00.

Authors Suraya Dadoo (on the screen) and Raouf Farrah address the launch of 'Rising for Palestine' in Cape Town. (Read about the book launch at https://doi.org/10.14426/ry1zh571)

'Rising for Palestine 'is, finally, a book about memory and duty. It remembers … Namibia's genocide … that Congo's dead number over six million since 1996 … that Western Sahara remains Africa's last colony. And it insists that to remember any of these is to remember Palestine. The coloniser, the book argues, wants us to see each struggle as separate, contained, manageable. Solidarity is the refusal of that fragmentation.

There are books that inform, books that argue, and then there are books that arrive like a clenched fist wrapped in a shared heartbeat. *Rising for Palestine: Africans in Solidarity for Decolonisation & Liberation* belongs to the third category. Edited by Algerian writer-researcher Raouf Farrah and South African independent scholar Suraya Dadoo, this urgent book lands in a moment when the word "genocide" risks numbness. Yet the editors refuse to let that numbness settle. Instead, they gathered 30 contributors − scholars, diplomats, activists, poets, former freedom fighters − to do something both simple and revolutionary: they remind Africa, and the world, that Palestine is not a distant crisis but a mirror.

The book opens not with theory but with an epigraph drawn from daily life in Gaza: "Every morning, Gaza speaks in fragments − shattered homes, broken bodies, names etched into screens before they vanish beneath the dust." Those fragments become the organising principle of what follows. The editors write that what defines this genocide "is not a lack of information, but its relentless saturation − and

so the book refuses to perform neutrality. It declares, clearly and early on, that there is a coloniser and a colonised, an aggressor and a people under annihilation. This is not polemic for its own sake. It is the necessary ground setting for any serious conversation about solidarity.

The book is structured into five movements. Part I, ***Legacies of Violence***, draws direct lines from Namibia's genocide under German colonial rule (1904–1908) to Gaza today. Jephta Uaravaera Nguherimo contributes a devastating personal history: his great-great-grandmother died of hunger during that genocide; his great-grandmother survived to tell of concentration camps on Shark Island. In "From the River to the Rift," Kambale Musavuli traces the parallel struggles of Palestine and the Democratic Republic of Congo, both caught in "the global struggle for self-determination". And Shahd Hammouri offers a lawyer's bleak reckoning with international law's failure, asking whether Palestine will finally become "international law's breaking point".

Part II, ***Solidarity and Resistance***, contains the book's most electric passages. A lengthy interview with Dr Basim Naim, described as a member of Hamas's political bureau, allows Palestinian armed resistance to speak in its own voice − a rarity in Western-facing writing. Another interview with Ambassador Malainin Lakhal of the Western Sahara's Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic draws explicit parallels between Saharawi and Palestinian struggles, two peoples locked in what Lakhal calls "a shared history of colonialism and aspiration for self-determination". Zahid Rajan's chapter on Kenya is particularly uncomfortable reading, tracing how a nation that once housed a Palestinian embassy that was a hub of anti-Daniel arap Moi resistance against the former Kenyan president later became complicit in normalising ties with Israel.

Part III, ***Africa–Israel Collaboration***, is where the book earns its most urgent claim to relevance. It maps, in granular detail, how Israeli

surveillance technology − Pegasus spyware, facial recognition systems, digital listening devices − has been sold to African governments from Rwanda to Ghana to Nigeria. As contributor Kribsoo Diallo writes: "Occupied Palestine effectively functions as an open-air laboratory for Israel to test surveillance technology before selling them to repressive regimes around the world in exchange for diplomatic favours." This is not abstract geopolitics. It is a tracing of the actual pipelines through which colonial violence exports itself.

Part IV, ***Reimagining Liberation***, turns toward the future. Hamza Hamouchene's chapter on climate crisis and ecocide in Gaza – "[W]hat is unfolding in Gaza is not merely genocide: it is also ecocide" − adds a dimension often missing from Palestine solidarity discourse. Rosebell Kagumire's contribution on Pan-African feminists insists that "our struggles are one," centring women's organising as the unsung backbone of solidarity movements. The book closes with poetry by Marwan Makhoul and Dareen Tatour, as if to remind us that after all the analysis, what remains is a people singing their own existence.

The book's endorsements carry weight, but none more so than that of Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories. On Instagram, via Pluto Press's account, Albanese calls *Rising for Palestine*" a long-awaited and much-needed publication" – a powerful call to global solidarity, uniting African and Palestinian struggles in a shared fight against colonialism, apartheid, and empire. Coming from Albanese, whose meticulous UN reports have documented Israel's "settler-colonial" project and "crime of apartheid" with legal rigour, this endorsement signals that the book is not merely activist literature but serious scholarship with moral authority.

What makes *Rising for Palestine* distinctive is not its argument; the argument that African and Palestinian liberation are intertwined is, as the editors note, decades old, forged at the landmark 1945 anti-colonial

Pan-African Congress summit and sustained through the Organisation of African Unity. What is distinctive is the book's willingness to hold two truths simultaneously. It celebrates South Africa's boldness in bringing Israel before the International Court of Justice while also noting, in Roshan Dadoo's chapter, that "South Africa is still a major supplier of coal to Israel". It honours Kenya's revolutionary history while documenting its present betrayal. It acknowledges the African Union's historical solidarity while mapping how Israeli "religious diplomacy" and Christian Zionism have successfully courted African evangelical leaders.

This ambivalence is the book's great strength. The editors coin the phrase "pragmatic ambivalence" to describe how African governments have accepted Israeli security assistance while publicly condemning occupation. They do not moralise from afar. Instead, they invite readers into the difficult work of holding nations − including morally exemplary ones like South Africa − accountable for their contradictions.

The timing of this publication is no accident. Released in March 2026, nearly two and a half years after October 7, 2023, *Rising for Palestine* enters a world where the death toll in Gaza has reached over 72,000 according to Gaza's Health Ministry − a figure the book does not hesitate to declare. It speaks from within ongoing catastrophe, not after it. That gives the collection a rawness, a refusal to perform the tidy closure that academic volumes often mistake for rigour.

If the book has a weakness, it is that some chapters read more like manifestos than analyses. The interview format, while powerful in giving voice to Palestinian and Saharawi diplomats, occasionally lacks critical distance. And readers hoping for a diversity of perspectives on, say, the ethics of armed resistance will find only one side represented. But that, perhaps, is the point. *Rising for Palestine* is not a balanced debate. It is a declaration of alignment.

The conclusion, co-written by Farrah and Dadoo, is titled "*No Liberation Without Action*". It refuses to let the reader close the book unchanged. "To speak of Africa-Palestine solidarity," they write, "is to confront a world structured by violence: Gaza's rubble, Sudan's humanitarian crisis, Congo's plundered mines − all reveal the imprint of empire in its many facets." They call for "a decolonial practice of solidarity" that moves beyond statements and resolutions toward material action: divestment, boycott, convoy organising, legal pressure.

One chapter describes the "Sumud Convoy" of 1,700 Tunisians, Algerians, and Libyans who attempted to reach Rafah by land a failed journey, perhaps, but a breathtaking act of embodied solidarity. That image lingers: bodies in motion, ignoring borders, refusing the lie that some lives matter less than others.

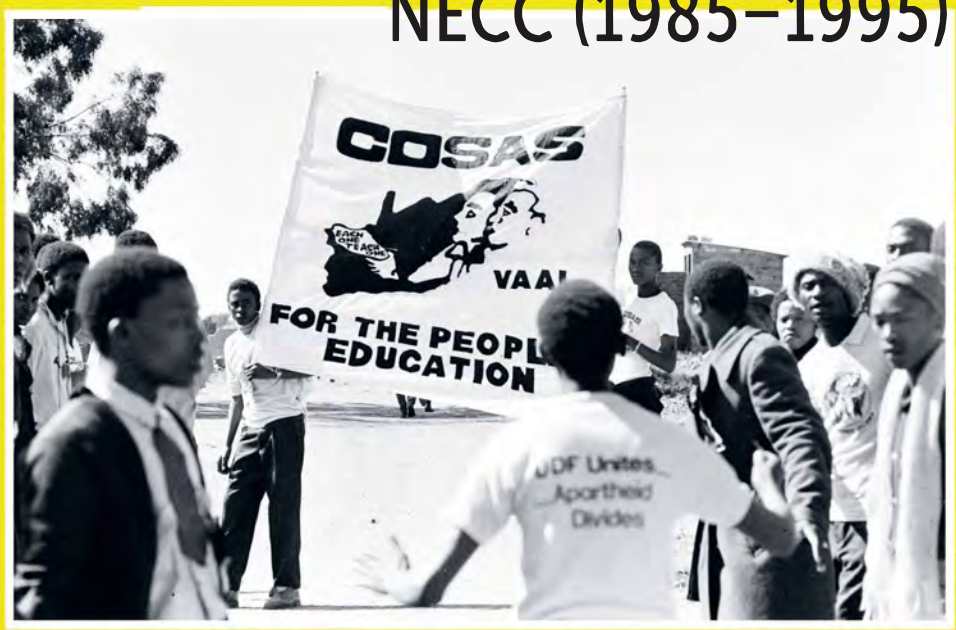
Rising for Palestine is, finally, a book about memory and duty. It remembers that Namibia's genocide happened. It remembers that Congo's dead number over six million since 1996. It remembers that Western Sahara remains Africa's last colony. And it insists that to remember any of these is to remember Palestine. The coloniser, the book argues, wants us to see each struggle as separate, contained, manageable. Solidarity is the refusal of that fragmentation.

Francesca Albanese is right: this is a long-awaited publication. But "long-awaited" suggests passive waiting. *Rising for Palestine* is not a book to wait for. It is a book to act on. Read it with a highlighter in one hand and a list of your local Palestinian solidarity organisations in the other. The editors have done their work. Now it's time for you to do yours.

Bruce Kadalie is IFAA's Forums and Events Co-ordinator.

FROM EDUCATION CRISIS TO ORGANISATION

REFLECTIONS ON THE NECC (1985–1995)



Linda Chisholm, Shireen Motala, Yogesh Narsing, Terri Maggott,
Charissa Shay-Sithole, Elaine Unterhalter and June Bam

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From Education Crisis to Organisation:

Reflections on the NECC (1985-1995)

Contributions by Linda Chisholm, Shireen Motala, Yogesh Narsing, Terri Maggott, Charissa Shay-Sithole, Elaine Unterhalter and June Bam

Review by Maureen Robinson

Fanele, an imprint of Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2026, 283 pgs, R380

The National Education Crisis Committee (NECC), later the National Education Coordinating Committee, was an intergenerational social movement that united South African students, parents, and teachers in schools and universities between 1985 and 1995, advocating for 'People's Education for People's Power' and working to transform the education system.

At the launch of the book, *From Education Crisis to Organisation: Reflections on the NECC (1985-1995),* Linda Chisholm, one of the co-authors, explained how the book started as an opportunity to reclaim memories of the work of the NECC. She pointed out how the 1976 Soweto uprisings and the 2015 #Fees Must Fall movement live strongly in people's minds, whereas the NECC, also a key moment in the history of educational resistance, has received less attention.

The Introduction to the book explains the origins of the NECC. In the 1980s South African schools for Black and Coloured learners had become a battleground against apartheid. It was a time of mass protests

and class boycotts, and the regime responded with violent police crackdowns and the banning of student organisations. Amid this chaos, the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee convened a conference in 1985 to discuss a solution to the crisis in Black schools. The conference was attended by more than 100 organisations, including parents, teachers, and students, with delegates taking a resolution to set up a national coordinating committee for education.

Over a period of ten years, the NECC brought together a range of organisations and actors in education across the country, in a struggle for what became known as 'People's Education for People's Power'. Educational change was seen as a primary vehicle for social transformation, with the more radical slogan of 'Liberation before Education' also taking centre stage at certain points in the movement's history.

The seven authors of this book were collectively driven by a commitment not only to capture the rich history of the NECC, but also to document challenges, tensions, and lessons to be learnt. As such, the book is divided into two main parts. Part 1 is entitled *Historical glimpses into the NECC* and comprises analytic reflections on different aspects of the NECC, while Part 2 records 19 interviews with people who were active in various organisations at the time. The chapters are complemented by an extensive list of abbreviations and acronyms relating to the period, as well as a timeline of key events that occurred between the declaration of the State of Emergency in July 1985 and the disbanding of the NECC in April 1995. A massive list of references across chapters provide additional sources.

School pupils at Lamontville High School outside Durban protest against South African Defence Force attacks, 1987. Photo: South African History Online

What then are the key issues identified in the historical glimpses of Part 1? Different authors discuss the NECC within the broader anti-apartheid movement, the students' role in the NECC, tensions relating to intellectuals, activism, and knowledge creation, and the transnational dimensions of the NECC's funding networks. A final chapter in this section presents the Khoi-San social movement as a contemporary manifestation of the link between education and culture.

Much research has gone into these chapters, with extensive use of archival sources such as pamphlets, journals, and newspaper articles, supplemented by several theoretical analyses. The detail of the accounts is impressive −even at times overwhelming − and close and concentrated reading is needed to do justice to the many names, dates, organisations, and publications that constitute the evidence cited in these chapters. It is a dense manuscript, not a popular text, and is likely to be of particular

interest to political scientists, historians, educationists, activists, and postgraduate students of education, politics and history.

Two examples provide a taste of what the reader can expect in Part 1. The chapter entitled "Situating the NECC within the anti-apartheid movement" describes several tensions, schisms, and disputes across the movement, thus reminding us that even organisations such as the NECC, that transcended differences between political players in positive ways, will be characterised by contestation. The chapter "Students of the NECC: SRCs, democratic school governance and 'Liberation before Education'" describes the intergenerational solidarity of the time and asks whether such solidarity across the education sector might be possible today.

Part 2 documents interviews with a range of people who played key roles in the NECC. With thousands of people involved in the NECC, the selection of interviewees is always going to be partial. The authors acknowledge this, indicating that the people interviewed "are not a definitive group, nor are they representative of all the layers and categories of people who were involved" (p. 3). Nevertheless, as the authors go on to say: "It is hoped that the selection of NECC personalities and activists is sufficient to give a sense of a vibrant, formidable organisation that was arguably one of the foremost historically significant forces in South African education" (p. 4).

Represented in these interviews are people who were involved in the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee, local and regional NECC executive structures, members of university-based Education Policy Units, political, teacher, worker, and student organisations, People's Education commissions, and education and funding agencies. The vast array of structures represented here gives an immediate sense of the vibrancy of the times, with different interviewees describing the energy of their day-to-day involvement, including ways in which the police and army had to be held at bay on several occasions.

PEOPLE'S ENGLISH FOR PEOPLE'S POWER

A committee working under the People's Education Commission of the NECC has drafted proposals based upon the positions emerging from

- the Freedom Charter
- resolutions of the December 1985 and March 1986 Education Crisis Conferences
- the Education Charter
- the priorities of community and worker movements

These proposals aim to assist all learners to

- understand the evils of apartheid and to think and speak in non-racial, non-sexist and non-elitist ways
- determine their own destinies and to free themselves from oppression
- play a creative role in the achievement of a non-racial democratic South Africa
- use English effectively for their own purposes
- express and consider the issues and questions of their time
- transform themselves into full and active members of society
- proceed with their studies

Do you support these aims ?
Do you agree with the specific proposals which follow ?
Do you believe that the specific proposals match the aims ?

The specific proposals which follow depend upon an understanding of

EDUCATION AS PROCESS

The term process here means exploration through language. It involves discussion and revision, and an understanding of how parts are eventually related to the whole.
Process values the contributions of all the learners and makes every member of the group responsible for the learning experience.
The teacher's role is to make this possible.

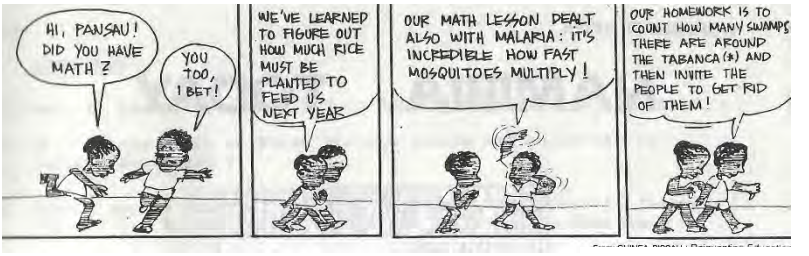
The committee needs your response to these specific suggestions about method, content and language competence.

METHOD might include

- discussion, debate, argument, speeches
- group and pair work
- sharing and pooling of ideas
- collecting and recording community based experiences
- storytelling, readings, retelling
- participation by members of the community
- research
- dramatization, performance, song
- the actual production of newsletters, pamphlets, notices
- co-operation not competition
- collective development, not individualisticselfishness
- thinking, not memorising

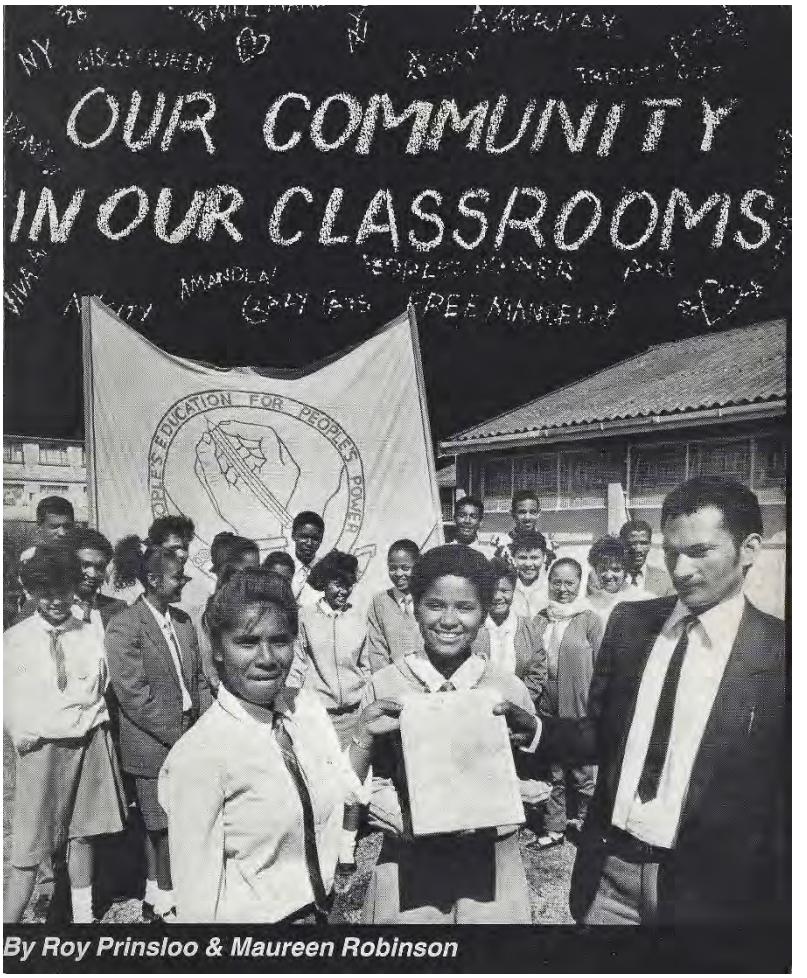
NECC Press Release, 1986, published in 'People's Education for Teachers,' proceedings of a conference held at the University of the Western Cape, October 1987.

Several photographs are included in the book. Interestingly, all are of moments of protest, showing banners of organisations such as the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), the Azanian Students' Organisation (AZASO) and others. Missing are any pictures that reflect ways in which the NECC influenced approaches to teaching and learning, surely a cornerstone of educational transformation. Many teaching resources were developed at the time, as outlined in the chapters on the People's History Commission, and mentioned by other authors, and it would have been illuminating to see examples of these.



Cartoon from "People's History" - magazine of the Cathkin History Society

The reviewer sourced examples of the teaching resources emerging at the time.
Above:
An alternative approach to teaching mathematics, from an NGO in Guinea Bissau called Reinventing Education.
Left: 'What is People's History?' worksheet.
Next page:
Teachers and learners at a Cape Flats secondary school researched their community's history.



From the back cover of Our Community in our Classrooms:

"In 1986, a group of teachers and students from Cathkin Senior Secondary School on the Cape Flats decided to explore Heideveld, their community. Our Community in our Classrooms documents this exciting project, and locates it within a people's history tradition. The book includes an outline of the history of Heideveld, with numerous photographs, students' drawings, and other illustrations. It also contains discussions and guidelines for teachers of all subjects who would like to bring local history into their school curriculum."

[The book] documents a history that needs to be placed on record, along with the many moments of resistance, reform, and transformation in our country. Younger generations need to be able to look back on, and understand, the struggles of their parents…

The final chapter of the book, "The NECC in retrospect," provides a useful overview of the themes and lessons articulated in the different chapters. It outlines the importance of documenting the history of educational struggles, and reflects on the key campaigns, debates, tensions, and fractures in the different social movements that made up the NECC. It reminds us of the urgency and volatility of the times, referring to how structures were built, even as many national leaders found themselves imprisoned. Key themes of the book are summarised, including the vision of democracy and agency, cross-sectoral and intergenerational organisation, the intellectual-activist relationship, international support, and liberatory education.

In its entirety, the book is a valuable contribution to historical information and provides detailed analysis of political, organisational, and personal factors that were prevalent during the time of the NECC. Many books, monographs, and papers were written in the 1980s and 1990s on different aspects of the NECC, however few would have as comprehensive a coverage as this book. It documents a history that needs to be placed on record, along with the many moments of resistance, reform, and transformation in our country. Younger generations need to be able to look back on, and understand, the struggles of their parents, and the book opens this opportunity.

In the final chapter we read: "The thousands of people who were involved in its organisations took with them, wherever they were, formative ideas and experiences that assisted them in helping to shape their own future, as well as that of the country" (p. 272). This opens challenges for subsequent writings: to trace the leadership roles that many of these people have or continue to play in South Africa, to consider whether the creative curricula of People's Education have filtered into the content and teaching methods promoted today, to explore the influence of the NECC on later policy initiatives, such as the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI), and to reflect on what it would take for our South African society to work productively and in transformative ways across our diverse communities.

Professor Maureen Robinson, former Dean of Education at Stellenbosch University, was a teacher on the Cape Flats during the turbulent 1980s and went on to produce alternative teaching material in the Materials Development Project at the University of the Western Cape. She spent more than 30 years in teacher development in tertiary education.

Selected excerpts

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14426/ksa3a408

Refer to the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) in any contemporary discussion, and very few people will know what you are talking about. Yet, this organisation played a pivotal role in South African society: it provided sustained resistance to apartheid education during the crucial decade of transition between 1985 and 1995. Images of students marching against police, facing tanks and bullets and organising resistance across the country are ingrained in the memories of those who lived through that period of struggle. What is less widely known is how students and others were mobilised to cre9ate a formidable force of foot soldiers who challenged state authority in every area of the education system.

The NECC emerged from a National Consultative Conference of parents, teachers and students, which was called by the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee (SPCC) in December 1985 to discuss the crisis in schooling (SAHA, n.d.). The Conference was attended by more than a hundred organisations. The delegates identified a need for a national coordinating committee (Muhammad, 1996) for education, and the following year the NECC was formed. It espoused the view that the struggle for education should be in education. It adopted the idea, then current, of 'liberation before education' and called for 'People's Education for People's Power'. As a 'loose, mass-based organisational structure' (Rensburg, 1996) both the central NECC coordinating body and its members engaged in several independent educational campaigns and initiatives, many of which focused on defining what a liberated or 'people's' education might be.

Extract from Introduction by Terry Maggott and Linda Chisholm

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Scholars of the People's Education movement generally agree that the NECC emerged from a meeting in 1985 called by the SPCC. That meeting called for a larger meeting, which was held at the University of

the Witwatersrand and attended by more than a hundred organisations, and the topic of discussion was finding a solution to the crisis in black schools. Since 1979, South African townships had become centres of resistance against apartheid on various fronts, including schools and universities.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

In anticipation of a future beyond apartheid, the People's Education movement, coordinated by the NECC, experimented with new methods of schooling, teaching and teacher education; methods that, in practice, laid the foundations for the future (Bot, 1986; Hartshorne, 1988; Tomlin, 2016). In doing so, it brought the future squarely into the present. This was a stark contrast to the call for ungovernability, which reduced the possibilities for reconstruction in the future.

Coloured schoolchildren from the Western Cape on the march, 1980 school boycotts. Photo: South African History Online

The NECC initiated significant interventions, such as the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) and Education Commissions, to focus on People's History, People's Mathematics and People's English. These interventions were concerned, not only with 'crisis management' (Carrim and Sayed, 1992), but with promoting a non-racial future through curriculum design and school governance practices mandated by and designed in close collaboration with 'the people'. In addressing these issues, the NECC hoped to lay the foundations for a non-racial future. One practical application was to 'place the development of mathematics in a more balanced historical context so that the present Euro-centric vision of mathematics is challenged by acknowledging the major contributions made by other communities' (Breen, 1991).

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The future of education that the NECC envisaged consisted of a single, democratic, non-racist, non-sexist education system. Part of this vision hinged on the twin ideals of democracy and agency. Students were radicalised into seeing themselves as active agents in their learning, and through structures such as the parent-teacher-student associations (PTSAs) and student representative councils (SRCs) forged a space in which schools could function democratically. This was a radical change from the banking model underpinning the pedagogy of Bantu Education. As an example, weeks before the first ever democratic election, on 1 April 1994, the National Education Conference launched a campaign to get learners, teachers and parents at each school to draw up a code of conduct to govern the culture of schools (Soderland, 1994). Arguably, this was the culmination of years of agitating for a single, non-racial education system that required the active participation of everyone involved. In other words, the vision for democracy was not left to the future: learning during the crisis prepared society for a system based on bottom-up change, in contrast to the top-down, tyrannical model of Bantu Education.

The apartheid government banned the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in August 1985, four months before the NECC was established. By this time, COSAS had grown into a powerful political force affiliated with the United Democtratic Front (UDF). *Photo: South African History Online*

Part of the vision for agentive, democratic school communities lay in programmes of mass action, and indeed, the NECC supported both students and teachers as they struggled against apartheid. Throughout its ten years it tried to remedy past injustices by keeping schools open and functioning amid the continual political, economic and social crises, as a way of preparing for the future. To do this, the NECC organised various People's Education programmes, including subject commissions, namely People's History, People's English and People's Mathematics. It also tackled administrative challenges to black education, by protesting successfully against permits for black school- goers. It held catch-up programmes (with partner organisations) for 2000 pupils in Pietermaritzburg (Mngadi, 1990), to make up for the class time lost because of school closures in 1990. A winter school was organised in July 1993 in Soweto, albeit with limited success (Mavuso, 1993), and in September 1993 the NECC announced 'amazing prizes' for students who showed commitment to catching up on missed school activities (Strachan, 1993).

Almost 40 years after the emergence of the NECC, why is it important to remember an organisation of this kind? The answer lies in the broad nature of the NECC. It was able to bring together various actors in education, from across the country, at a time when the war against black lives was at its peak. It was, possibly, the last instance of a mass movement in education, one that transcended the narrow confines of the university student movements that have populated the history of the new democracy. The NECC was also an important experiment with the agency of the various actors in education: teachers, students, parents and communities – agency that has, arguably, been eroded by the tendency towards neoliberalism in the post-1994 period, in which education is increasingly privatised and dictated not by these actors but by market forces and the proliferation of education technology (Vally, 2007).

Lastly, the NECC was also an important example of the ways in which class mobility is sometimes related to participation in education movements, given how several of its former members now occupy elite positions in government and universities. But perhaps most importantly, consideration of the NECC adds to the rich history of the education struggle in South Africa by highlighting a period not dominated by the African National Congress (ANC), whether pro-ANC in 1976 or anti-ANC in 2015. The following chapters deal with various aspects of the NECC and thus contribute towards a new memory of resistance in South African education.

From chapter 1: Situating the NECC within the broader anti-apartheid movement by Terry Maggot.

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