

## **Developmental issues facing the San people of Namibia: Road to de-marginalization in formal education**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

As for other indigenous people in the world, the living standards of the San in Namibia have drawn attention as they have been viewed as contravening basic human rights. Since its independence from apartheid South Africa, the Namibian Government, as a member of the United Nations (UN), has embarked upon various projects and interventions in order to secure the rights of their indigenous communities, including those of the San.

One of the most progressive conventions of the UN, the Salamanca Statement of 1994 on inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994), promulgates that schooling should cater for all children regardless of their differences or difficulties and serves as a driver towards such efforts. It is worth noting that this global educational transformation came at a time when Namibia was in its fourth year of independence from apartheid South Africa, and was attempting to deconstruct and redress the fragmented education system that it had inherited. It was an education that separated learners depending on their race, gender, ethnicity and language, and if they had a disability (MEC, 1993). It is through this historical backdrop that the San face current challenges as agents in an inclusive space.

The educational experiences of indigenous San children in Namibia reflect discrimination, isolation and a compromised quality of education, and their identity and their indigenous knowledge is not fully embraced in the broader education system. As a result many of them fall through the safety net of this all-embracing educational

philosophy. It is for this reason that San children have become a heightened concern and responsibility for the education authority in Namibia.

Through the educational framework “Inclusive Education”, Namibia now embodies an educational provision which aims to be free from discrimination and strongly secured in the values of social justice, equality and human rights (UNESCO, 1994). In redressing educational disadvantage, the Government of Namibia has identified increasing the educational participation of San children and retaining them in the education system as a special priority. Various commitments by the Ministry of Education (ME) have been made to support San children so that they have access to formal education in an inclusive society. Some of these interventions included placing San children in public schools and hostels, and waiving their school fees. On a broader societal level, San communities have been provided with other basic needs, such as houses. Furthermore, having recognized the San as a group ‘at risk’, the government established a department in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to specifically address their issues. Most of these interventions have had a low rate of success (Graham-Brown, 1991).

Education in Namibia has to critically analyse the barriers to providing an education that would foster access, equality, equity and democratic participation. How would the assimilation of the San community into a dominant culture and lifestyle support their increased and meaningful participation when the San’s cultural beliefs and values are in limited consideration? Could this be one of the major factors that minimize the chances of educational success and social inclusion of San children?

In this chapter, we use the terms ‘marginalized people’, ‘indigenous people’ and ‘minority groups’ interchangeably, and in the context of ‘few in numbers’ and not ‘inferior to’ in comparison with other groups. We thus assume the views of social and human rights models as opposed to the views of medical models. In the case of the medical model ‘deficit’ is central to addressing barriers with the view that the challenges experienced by the San people will be due to the fact that they are of San origin and their difficulties are situated in being San. The human rights model emphasizes human dignity as an entitlement of everyone by virtue of being human. Proponents of the social model would view San communities as being ‘marginalized’ by the environment and society. The chapter further aligns itself with the definition of indigenous people, by stating that:

“Their cultures and ways of life differ considerably from the dominant society and their cultures are under threat, in some cases to the extent of extinction. A key characteristic for most of them is that the survival of their particular way of life depends on access and rights to their traditional land and the natural resources thereon. They suffer from discrimination as they are being regarded as less developed and less advanced than other more dominant sectors of society. They often live in inaccessible regions, often geographically isolated

and suffer from various forms of marginalisation, both politically and socially. They are subject to domination and exploitation within national, political and economic structures that are commonly designed to reflect the interests and activities of the national majority. This discrimination, domination and marginalisation violate their human rights as peoples/communities, threaten the continuation of their cultures and ways of life and prevents them from being able to genuinely participate in deciding their own future and forms of development.’ (ACHPR, 2005, p. 89).

Considering the definition above, which comprehensively depicts the life of the San people in Namibia, there is a need to treat the San as a special group not with the aim to further marginalize or provide them with preferential treatment, but with the aim to ensure that their basic rights and subsequent needs are restored. Their educational needs thus cannot be addressed as those for mainstream communities. Rightly so, the ME’s National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children lists children of San and Ovahimba communities as specialized groups that could be excluded from education if no intensified efforts are made to deliberately include them in educational programmes (GRN, 2002).

## THE CONTEXT OF THE SAN PEOPLE OF NAMIBIA

The San are southern Africa’s indigenous people, mostly living today in Angola, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, with smaller numbers in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Former hunter–gatherers, the San are currently living in conditions of extreme marginalization and poverty, and are struggling to adapt to a fast-changing world. The name ‘San’ is the name that the Damara used, meaning ‘gatherers’. The Ovaherero people refer to the San people as *Ovakuruveha* or, in short, *Ovakuruha* – ‘the ancient people of the land’. In Botswana, they are referred to as the Basarwa (Amathila, 2012, p. 193). In all of the countries in which they live, San communities experience problems with formal education, leading to low levels of success and very high dropout rates from both school and employment. They live at the margin of society and are often unemployed, and have poor living and health conditions. Most countries in which the San live have put programmes in place to help put them on a par with the rest of society.

In Namibia, there are an estimated 38,000 San people, making up about 2% of the population (Diekmann, Thiem & Hays, 2011). They live mainly in eight of Namibia’s 14 political regions: Kavango East, Kavango West, Kunene, Ohangwena, Omaheke, Oshikoto, Otjozondjupa and Zambezi. The intensive interviews and observations on which the information in this chapter is based were done in the Ohangwena, Oshikoto and Otjozondjupa regions. Interviews and observations were