

Access and Equality to Quality Education among the Marginalized Communities: A Case of the San and Ovahimba Communities in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2012, developed a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 4th goal of the SDGs provides a benchmark for ensuring accessible, inclusive, and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (Sachs, 2012). Although several milestones have been conducted in developing policies and curriculum reforms and increasing accessible, inclusive, and equitable quality basic education for all, marginalized communities remain at the fringe of education. In Namibia, the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education was enacted in 2013 to attain accessible, equitable, and quality education through efficiency, democracy, and advocacy for lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, Sector Policy on Inclusive Education, 2013). Notably, the National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children, finalized in 2000, marks a vital landscape to improve access and equality in education for marginalized communities. However, marginalized populations, particularly the San and Ovahimba communities, continue to benefit less from educational opportunities. Even if San and Ovahimba children enrol in schools (Basic and Secondary education), they experience hardships such as cost barriers, social discrimination, and lack of academic support, resulting in a high dropout rate (Hays et al., 2008). This paper examines accessibility and equality to quality education among Namibia's San and Ovahimba marginalized communities in the context of Namibian Sector Policy on Inclusive Education of 2013. A qualitative Case study design was used as a method of inquiry and a total of ten participants from each group (San and Ovahimba) were purposively selected. Data was collected by means of a semi-structured interview guide. The study results show that access barriers to quality education among the San and Ovahimba groups in Namibia is categorized into four main categories. Namely: Socio-economic, cultural, political and geographical /physical barriers.

Keywords: Accessibility, Basic Education, Equality, Inclusive Education, Marginalized Communities, Quality Education

Background of the Study

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Brazil in June 2012, developed a framework consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 4th goal of the SDGs provide a benchmark for ensuring accessible, inclusive, and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (Sachs, 2012; English et al, 2019). This framework, made significant strides in ensuring accessible, inclusive, and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all Namibians, and counter-addressed the discrepancies emerging from the colonial education system, which sidelined black people. Despite the launch of the SDGs framework, many Namibians still face significant access barriers and inequalities in quality education, especially ethnic minorities. On the basis of the above background, the government of the Republic of Namibia has launched several initiatives, including recognizing the San as an “educationally marginalized group, introducing the mother tongue as a medium of instruction, and enacting the Sector policy on Inclusive Education in 2013. The Sector Policy on Inclusive Education aimed at reducing the educational inequalities among marginalized children and ensuring the education system is inclusive, sensitive, and responsive to the needs of all children and that all children receive the same education irrespective of where they are in the country (MoE, Sector Policy on Inclusive Education, 2013). Matengu et al. (2019) indicated that in Namibia, there are indigenous minorities of the San community, comprised of Khwe, Hai-dom, Joe-hansi, and Khu tribes. They mainly engage in hunter-gatherer and pastoral livestock farming for livelihood (Matengu et al., 2019; Nkengbeza et al., 2021) and refer to these groups collectively as the San community. On the other hand, the Ovahimba, Ovazemba, and Ovatue are also among the indigenous minority tribes in Namibia, popularly known as the Ovahimba community, and they mainly concentrate on pastoral livestock farming for survival (Matengu et al., 2019).

While there are several programs and projects, such as the establishment of satellite and mobile schools geared towards increasing primary education enrolment among the San, accounting for 25% - 30% and an increase of about 50% among Ovahimba, very little has been done to increase the enrolment rate in secondary and higher education phases (Zimba et al, 2023; Matengu et al, 2019).

Brown and Haihambo (2015); Chowdhury et al (2020) confirms that the representation of the San and Ovahimba communities in higher education, either as enrolment or staff, has been deficient. . This trend is, of course, linked to low levels of basic and secondary education attainment among marginalized communities as a result of inaccessibility and inequalities in the provision of education among various geographical areas. More so, the unequal geographical distribution of schools and institutions of higher learning equally contributes to low enrolment rates at the secondary and tertiary levels among the San and Ovahimba communities.

According to the Namibian National Population and Housing Census Report (2011), the adult literacy rate in the Epupa constituency, a typical Himba setting, stood at 29.4%. The UNDP Human Development Report (2001) also reveals that 84% of the San people were illiterate (Sheyapo et al, 2023). Despite an enabling legislative framework as provided by different policies and initiatives, educational retention (Basis, Secondary, and Post-secondary) among both the San and Ovahimba marginalized communities continues to be low. The above stance signifies an introspection into structural and policy issues that shape access and equality in quality education for Namibia's San and Ovahimba marginalized communities.

Distribution of local language by percentage in 2011:

<i>Main language</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Oshiwambo	48.9
Nama/Damara	11.3
Afrikaans	10.4
Otjiherero (includes Himba, Zemba, etc.)	8.6

Kavango	8.5
Lozi	4.8
English	3.4
German	0.9
San	0.8
Other	2.4

Source: 2011 Population and Housing Census

Review of Related Literature

National Options for Educationally Marginalized Children

After the implementation of the “Towards Education for All” policy document and the First National Development Plan (NDPI) failed to address the educational plight of marginalized communities, the government sought it crucial to re-engineer new strategies to enhance universal access to education for all Namibians with particular focus on educationally marginalized children. This policy is part of the alternative strategies to improve access to primary education for all children irrespective of race, sex, ethnicity, and social status. In the context of this policy, educationally marginalized children are defined as “children who for one or another reason did not have access to relevant and meaningful formal, informal and non-formal education due to socio-economic, cultural, political and demographic deprivation” (Ministry of Basic Education and Culture, 2018). Recognition of the San and Ovahimba children as educationally marginalized was an empirical outcome of this policy. Although the policy addressed some access barriers for marginalized children, the policy is limited to primary education grades 1-7. Therefore, children who complete primary education and only drop out at the secondary education level (grade 8 and above) are excluded from the provisions of this policy. This observation contradicts the NDPI proclamation that “every Namibian has to have at least ten years of formal education to be considered literate. Since the National Policy Options for Educational Marginalized Children is not inclusive of the entire marginalized population, access and equality to quality education for marginalized communities remains an area of concern.

Sector Policy on Inclusive Education

The Sector policy on Inclusive Education was endorsed in 2013 on the premise that inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach all learners despite their geographical location or socioeconomic status (Slee, 2018). As such, all educational policies and practices should be guided by the principle of inclusive education. The policy aimed to ensure that all Namibian learners have access to equitable quality education that responds to their learning needs. The Sector Policy on Inclusive Education supports other policy directions, such as the National Curriculum for Basic Education, the Curriculum Framework for Inclusive Education, the Education Sector Policy for Orphans and Vulnerable Children, and achieving the Education for All goal. In this regard, particular emphasis is placed on accommodating learners from marginalized communities (San and Ovahimba) previously excluded from the mainstream education system. Unlike the National Policy Options for Education, the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education takes cognizance of Early Childhood Development, Pre-Primary, and Secondary Education. This new area of focus gave rise to the development of Early Childhood Development Centers coupled with removing school fees for primary education in 2000 and, subsequently, free secondary education in 2014. After that, the School Feeding Program for Ovahimba and San children emerged to keep children from disadvantaged backgrounds in school. The in-service Teacher’s Training Programme, Mobile schools for Ovahimba, and curriculum review to strengthen Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction in Primary Education were yet notable milestones of the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education. The philosophy behind the mother tongue is that when children learn in their home languages, they can link learning and day-to-day experiences (Opertti et al, 2014). Even though

this policy contributed to increased enrolment in primary education and completion of secondary school, a significant gap in higher education remains.

Access Barrier to Education: The San People

Most San people are spread along Namibia's Eastern and Northern parts. The San population is approximately 35,000, representing the six tribes with unique customs and traditions, which implies that the San group is not homogenous (Botha et al, 2017). The largest group is the Hai//Om in the northern and the Otjozondjupa regions, followed by the Ju/'hoansi in Eastern Otjozondjupa and Omaheke regions and then Kxoe in the Zambezi Region (IWGIA, 2020). Although the number of San children attending school rose between 1999 and 2001, San children continue to benefit less from the education system in terms of school completion and provision of equitable quality education. According to the latest UNICEF report (2017), almost 60% of the San children are out of school, and only 1% of San children completed secondary school. A high dropout rate is exacerbated by gender differences (a high number of girls leaving school as compared to boys).

Limited access and inequality in education are fuelled by several structural barriers that may vary from community to community. Firstly, the uneven distribution of schools in the San community makes it difficult for children to access since they may have to travel long distances. Secondly, Most San children are left without a choice of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in lower primary education because there are fewer qualified teachers in Native San languages. Therefore, San children are instructed in Khoe-Khoegowab, English, Setswana, or Afrikaans instead of the mother tongue, which affects the retention of children throughout the secondary phase. More so, poverty and its many behavioural characteristics force San children to work on farms as casual workers to fend for themselves instead of attending school. In some instances, the young San girls are forced into early marriages in exchange for materials (Mazurana et al, 2019). Similarly, social discrimination against San children from fellow learners and teachers discourages San children from attending school. Consequently, low enrolment levels and higher education completion are directly linked to weak retention in the secondary phase (University of Namibia Report, 2010). With regards to adult literacy and non-formal education opportunities, very little has been done to provide learning opportunities to adults and out-of-school youth, leaving the San people to continue depending (materially) on other ethnic groups for survival (Nkengbeza et al, 2021).

Access Barriers to Education: The Ovahimba people

Ovahimba people live in the Kunene Region, Northwestern part of Namibia. The Ovahimba people are semi-nomadic and rely on cattle and goat herding as their primary source of income. The population of Ovahimba people is estimated at 50 0000 (Matengu et al, 2019). The National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children witnessed an increase in enrolment of Ovahimba children in primary education, complemented by the establishment of the famous "Ondao Mobile schools" and the Basic Education Programme in Opuwo- Namibia. Mobile schools were established to cater to Ovahimba children who often move with their families in search of better grazing and water for their livestock. A total of 30 mobile schools were established with one mobile teacher who moves with specific families of children enrolled in the school (Matengu et al., 2010). Today, about 50% of Ovahimba Children attend school due to various targeted educational programs (Brown & Haihambo, 2015) because the Ovahimba language is similar to Herero (one of the dominant written languages in Namibia), the issue of mother tongue instruction is no challenge for Ovahimba children (Bornman & Rose, 2015).

Though school enrolment has increased significantly over the years, the mobility of the Ovahimba people makes it difficult for children to complete school, resulting in high dropout rates. According to the German Technical Cooperation Agency (2001), resistance to modern education and conservative cultural backgrounds significantly affect school attendance and completion among Ovahimba children. Even though the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture provides adult literacy through literacy centres across all seven constituencies in

the Kunene Region, the adult literacy rate remains at 64.3% (National Planning Commission, 2011). Despite several tangible efforts of government and NGOs to improve access and equality among the Ovahimba indigenous group, a persistent trend of low enrolment in higher and non-formal education is worth noting.

Research Methodology

A qualitative case study design was used to examine the access barriers to quality education among Namibia's San and Ovahimba marginalized communities. Yin (2014) notes that a case study design allows a researcher to gain in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. To generate data and provide responses to research questions, a semi-structured interview guide comprising open-ended questions was administered to participants. The semi-structured interview is a data collection method that relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework; it allows the researcher to focus and direct participants toward a specific goal (Creswell, 2014). Generally, interviews allow probing and seeking of clarifications to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. In addition, a purposive- homogenous sampling technique was employed to select a sample of ten (10) participants, five of whom were drawn from the San community. Similarly, the other five (5) participants were drawn from the Ovahimba community. According to Barbie and Mouton (2004), Purposive homogenous sampling enables the researcher to select participants who sought information rich and possess in-depth knowledge of the subject under study. Data collected was analysed inductively using content analysis and texts/narratives as a unit of analysis. The following steps were taken during data analysis: first, raw data in the form of notes that were taken during interviews were transcribed and re-read to identify corresponding themes, then transcribed data was reviewed to categorize similarities as expressed by participants, and finally, similar themes were grouped, organized and then presented in the form of verbatim.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Access to education is influenced by many factors rooted in a particular society's socio-economic, cultural, and political systems. Namibia's San and Ovahimba groups face challenges in accessing essential educational opportunities. Marginalization and social exclusion from mainstream society exacerbate the plight of the San and Ovahimba communities. During interviews participants highlighted a multitude of access barriers that prevents the San and Ovahimba community from acquiring quality education and subsequently improving their livelihoods. Four main categories of access barriers emerged from this study and are described in detail below.

Socio-Economic Barriers

When asked about major access barriers to quality Education among the San/ Ovahimba groups, some participants had the following to say:

Our people are poor and vulnerable to say the least, so many children from poor families here do not attend school even if it is now free, the uniforms and other basic necessities are often not available, and therefore their parents prefer to send them in the bush in search of wild berries or devil's crawl (Participant A2).

I and my husband do not have a stable source of income apart from selling our small livestock here and there, but look at the mouths we must feed, they have to choose between attending school and eating, we cannot afford both (Participant B1).

A formidable number of participants indicated that poverty and vulnerability among the San and Ovahimba groups are significant access barriers to education; even though San and Ovahimba people succeed in enrolling in any form of learning activity, they tend to drop out due to financial hardships which instead forces them to secure peasant jobs to make ends meets. The financial implications associated with education push the already poor, marginalized communities to the receiving end of the spectrum. Moreover, the inequitable allocation of

resources meant to improve access to education emerged as another access barrier to education among the San and Ovahimba people in Namibia. In most instances, resources are allocated to welfare projects such as social grants, feeding schemes, and the like instead of dedicating resources to education and the upliftment of marginalized communities.

The above finding is congruent with a revelation by Talavera (2007) that indicated that “Ovahimba people are traditionally zero-income culture” because their wealth is solely determined by the number of cattle a family owns, thus many families rely on herding cattle and yet could barely afford to send their children to school.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural background of the San and Ovahimba groups plays a role in the extent to which children and adults from the two groups’ access quality education. Below are verbatim from interviews:

These past few years we have been hit by draught, our cattle died, and many continue to die, we are forced to move from one area to another time and time again in search of grazing for our livestock, this means that our children will drop out of school and stay away until we return back to the village when the rain comes. It is bad but we do not have any other choice. I wish the school could move with us wherever we go, then maybe our children will complete their studies uninterrupted (Participant B5).

She is just a 16 teen but had to drop out of school because she fell pregnant when she was 13 years, though she was in the hostel it was difficult for us to buy formula for the baby, therefore she had to stay and breastfeed the baby. Now as you can see she lives with her husband and married traditionally, it is obvious there is no more going back to school (Participant A3).

San and Ovahimba groups are semi-nomads, relying on hunting, gathering wild food, and rearing livestock. Participants of the study depict that the nomadic lifestyle is characterized by frequent re-location from one area to another in search of better grazing for their livestock, wild animals, or food; as such, it is difficult for them to access educational opportunities that are often not mobile.

The study reveals that early marriage is a standard cultural practice among Namibia's San and Ovahimba people. Quite often, young women and girls are forced into early marriage in exchange for material possessions such as livestock, money, and land. This harmful practice deprives girls and young women of opportunities to complete their education. Notably, the culture of over-dependency on charity and handouts prevents many people from marginalized communities from accessing educational opportunities.

This finding corresponds with previous studies (Sweet et al, 2020; Brown & Haihambo, 2015, & Ainscow, 2020) that postulate a high trend of early marriages among the marginalized groups in Namibia.

Political Barriers

Regarding political access barriers to quality education among the San and Ovahimba Groups, one participant said the following:

We are minority groups in Namibia and people ignore our voices when it comes to decision making, especially on education matters, even if we continue to say “nothing for us without us” it appears as if we are not heard (Participant B3).

I cannot remember the last time anyone consulted us on what we want our children or ourselves to be taught, you just see people coming with programmes and then we must accept, that is maybe because most of us are illiterate (Participant A1).

Political marginalization of the San and Ovahimba groups was labelled as one of the access barriers to education, according to participants' persistent exclusion of the San and Ovahimba people from the political processes' disadvantages marginalized communities and thus preventing them from accessing educational opportunities even if they are available within the localities. Participants further narrated that poor representation of the San and Ovahimba people in the decision-making process, including policy-making and educational planning, results in sidelining of issues and challenges preventing the two groups from accessing educational opportunities as such their voices are often left out of both educational policies and plans. It is inevitable to conclude that most educational programs are imposed upon marginalized communities, although they may not address their educational needs. Hays (2006), cited in WIMSA (2008), substantiates the above finding by stating that the major challenge lies in the fact that education systems, content, and provision are being managed by people who are not San and have no appreciation of what it means to be San and to be forced to live in a world that is foreign and a world apart from the livelihoods of San people.

Geographical/Physical Barriers

During the interviews participants narrated geographical factors are one of the access barriers to quality education among the San and Ovahimba groups. Below is an extract from interviews:

There is no single institution of higher learning anywhere near here, I completed grade 12, years ago but could not study further because my parents cannot afford to send me to Windhoek or other towns where I could pursue vocational courses. My dreams are shattered as I now resort to collecting firewood to make a living though I wanted to become a mechanic (Participant, B5).

Long distances to schools and sparse distributions of educational institutions are critical educational access barriers. The fact that children from marginalized communities have to travel long distances to school results in high dropout rates. Similarly, the unequal distribution of schools and other educational institutions within the San and Ovahimba communities makes it difficult for most people to access educational opportunities. Thus, the issue of access and equality in education among marginalized communities and other groups in Namibia is influenced by geographical location.

Access barriers to education among marginalized communities in Namibia are characterized by a myriad of factors, categorized as socio-economic, cultural, political, and geographical barriers. Though these barriers are grouped independently, they form an interconnected web of social exclusion that prevents marginalized communities from accessing and benefiting from educational opportunities compared to other social groups. The researcher deduced that access barriers to education among marginalized communities in Namibia are propelled by the existing social policies that might have failed to protect the interests of vulnerable groups in society.

Conclusions

The plight of Ovahimba and San people has been echoed in several reports, journal articles, and policy documents. Even though many interventions have been devised to improve access and equality in education for ethnic minorities, these groups continue to benefit less from the education system as compared to other groups. Overcoming inequalities in education and reaching marginalized people in Namibia requires the development of practical policies focusing on the hard-to-reach areas and addressing the root causes of marginalization that translate into a lack of access barriers and inequalities in basic, secondary, and higher education. Merely removing school fees is just the tip of the iceberg and does not improve the situation of marginalized communities; as such, solid government political commitment is highly recommended. Moreover, reviewing existing legal frameworks and inclusive educational policies is imperative to address a lack of access and education inequality among Namibia's marginalized communities. It is further recommended that San people should be put at the forefront of educational interventions with their full involvement and participation to achieve an education tailored to their needs.

Recommendations

Inclusivity, accessibility, and equality to quality education are paramount pillars for the 4th Goal of SDGs. Notwithstanding the education inequality gap among marginalized communities and ethnic majorities in Namibia continues to widen, there is a dire need for stakeholders in education to maximize efforts to address access barriers to education among marginalized communities. Simultaneously, the equitable distribution of resources and active involvement of marginalized communities in educational policy formulation is worth emphasizing. The customized educational needs and challenges facing marginalized communities regarding accessing quality education should be at the forefront of policy agendas and priorities at the national and regional levels.

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