The struggle for recognition

After the launch of SADTU in October 1990, one of the biggest challenges that frustrated the union was the state’s refusal to grant it legal recognition. SADTU initially adopted a constructive engagement-negotiations approach with the authorities for recognition. Ironically, SADTU was recognised by WCOTP and IFFTU as the only legitimate teachers’ organisation in South Africa, but not recognised in its own country. The issue of recognition was crucial for many reasons. Firstly, recognition meant that the union would be able to legally negotiate for improved salaries and conditions of service for its members. Secondly, it would enable the union to negotiate fair procedures for lodging of grievances, resolving disputes and seeking arbitration. Thirdly, it would allow the union to gain stop order facilities, which was critical to facilitate collection of members’ subscriptions and enhance the union’s financial stability. Finally, with recognition, SADTU would be in a position to defend its members from intimidation and victimisation by the education authorities and apartheid state, which had been intensifying in the early 1990s just prior to the first democratic elections in South Africa.

In seeking recognition, SADTU held several meetings with the Department of Education. The first meeting was with the Minister of National Education, Louis Pienaar, in Pretoria, on 23 November 1990. A detailed memorandum containing motivation for recognition was submitted. The Minister undertook to respond to SADTU’s application for recognition as soon as possible. He also agreed that a joint working group should be appointed to facilitate this matter. A year later, the recognition of SADTU had not been approved. As a result, a working group meeting between SADTU’s National Executive Committee (NEC) members and a delegation of the Department of Education met in Pretoria. The meeting clarified the legal position regarding SADTU’s recognition. It was then agreed that SADTU should submit a blanket application for recognition which would be sent to all the Departments of Education. A fully-motivated application was despatched on 16 January 1991. In response, SADTU received acknowledgement letters from the DET and the Department of Education and Culture (DEC), as well as from the Ministers in the Houses of Assembly, Delegates and Representatives. A follow-up meeting was held with the National Minister of Education in Cape Town on February 1991. From this meeting, it became clear to SADTU’s delegation, that the Minister had not undertaken the necessary consultation with other educational Ministers in respect of the matter. After realising that recognition was been deliberately delayed, SADTU pursued the matter at a higher level. The union approached the office of the State President F.W De Klerk in 1991, to resolve the matter. The State President’s office responded by acknowledging receipt of SADTU’s request. From the above meetings, it was clear that the state was not willing to recognise SADTU. A representation to the government, on behalf of the ANC, was also made by Nelson Mandela. The international community also supported SADTU’s recognition bid. For instance, Margaret Axell, the International Secretary of the Swedish Teachers Union, Lrarol Forbundet urged Mandela to support SADTU’s struggle for recognition. A letter that Axell wrote reads as follows:

We have more than once been disappointed and surprised when we learnt that SADTU [has] not yet obtained legal recognition from the authorities in South Africa. Therefore, we plead to you, Mr President, to take necessary actions in order to get the department of education to recognise SADTU immediately. If this will not be the case, we would like to know which criteria SADTU has not met that is required for recognition.

In response, Mandela wrote,
Thank you for the support you are giving to SADTU. The ANC has already made representation to the government about the recognition of all public unions. Our struggle for the right of Freedom of Association will see results only once a non-racial, non-sexist, united and democratic South Africa is in place.

The application was even extended to other departments, most notably, the former KwaZulu government. A SADTU delegation led by Randal van den Heever, Sheppard Mdladlana, Thulas Nxesi and Duncan Hindle went to Ulundi to meet the KwaZulu National Assembly to negotiate for stop order facilities and recognition. Randal remembers:

Yes and the big chief [Buthelezi] was there, he was sitting there... and we could feel the stares you know, and I mean [at] that time, there was terrible tension between ANC and Inkatha. What Buthelezi did [was] he allowed people to talk [first], at the end he talked... their response was, you who are saying you are a teachers' union, you are ANC and you are COSATU. We are not dealing with ANC and COSATU, sorry... you are a smokescreen for ANC, so that was the view. I mean there were several NATU members who were sitting in the meeting; but in the end [there was a breakthrough] because... I think Buthelezi liked Sheppard... he said at the end, look, you a man I can talk to, you know.

Considering the political stance of SADTU, it was not going to be easy for the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) to allow teachers to be mobilised under the banner of SADTU. It is clear from the interview that SADTU was seen as ANC. What the Inkatha representatives said to the SADTU delegation was reminiscent of an earlier dramatisation of the 'burial of COSATU' during an Inkatha rally held on May Day in 1985. On that day, members of the Inkatha Youth League, led by Inkatha’s formidable warlord Shabalala, carried a coffin seemingly bearing COSATU leaders, Barayi and Naidoo to their ‘grave’.

As a result of the state's delaying tactics in granting SADTU recognition, the union and its structures embarked on rolling mass action to pressure the authorities. The union was careful, however, to ensure that the campaign should not lead to a disruption of education activities in schools. It was reported that 40 000 teachers took part in mass action nationwide. From then on, there were a series of mass actions related to recognition and educational issues, which were linked to the broader demands for peace and democracy in South Africa.

In different regions, teachers participated in demonstrations organised by SADTU. These actions formed part of a two-day nationwide call for recognition of the union. In Pietermaritzburg, the protest included two placard demonstrations by over 200 teachers. A memorandum was delivered to Mr Ramiah, the acting superintendent. This protest was followed by the march of about 700 teachers, students and community leaders. Several public meetings were held to highlight the protest action. The union also criticised the recognition of the National Professional Teachers Association (NAPTOSA), the federation that became the home of the established teachers' associations that chose not to join SADTU, and destined to become a strong rival of SADTU. During this period, the struggle been waged by the democratic movement, led by the ANC, for equal education and inclusive participation in policy processes was intensifying. The state of black education was in crisis and teachers were increasingly being subjected to terrible working conditions spawned by apartheid and Bantu education.

In May 1993, SADTU declared a national strike. This was a historic strike that laid the basis...
for the establishment of labour legislation that gave teachers bargaining power. It also led to the formation of a national body, the National Education and Training Forum (NETF) in August 1993 that was charged with the responsibility to negotiate the transition to a post-apartheid education system. The year 1993 to 1994, marked the turning point as the country was moving towards a democratic government. The union convened its second Congress where resolutions pertaining to the national strike, recognition in the homelands, teachers' performance appraisal and education reconstruction and development were adopted. By this time, tension between the educational authorities and SADTU had reached boiling point. SADTU’s alliance with the working class was prioritised and the union adopted radical positions in line with the national democratic struggle.

Against a background of the aforementioned educational problems, the teacher strikes led by SADTU between 1990 and 1993 became commonplace, and covered a number of demands, including recognition, the battle against victimization of members, the union’s opposition to education restructuring, salary parity for female teachers, and demands for improved wages and conditions of service. Ultimately, SADTU’s long and difficult struggle for recognition would reap rewards with the passing of the Education Labour Relations Act in 1993, and the creation of the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC). Above all, SADTU drew attention to persisting inequalities and imbalances in society, which were reflected in an unequal education system. In this way, SADTU had placed itself in the forefront of the vanguard for change.

In the final analysis, SADTU’s emergence and preparedness to challenge the policies and actions of an unjust state and employer were influenced by the contested nature of the political transition. This led a deepening of the crisis in African education, compelling SADTU to demand equity, social justice and democratic practices in service delivery; SADTU had adopted a clear and unambiguous policy of aligning itself with the forces of progressive change, and it was not surprising that those who stood to benefit from a preservation of the status quo, criticised SADTU’s militancy as irresponsible and ‘unprofessional’. These critics included NAPTOSA affiliates, members of the public, media commentators and Department officials, and set the tone for educational and political contestation in the years ahead.
Development Programmes

The goals and programmes of SADTU, which had been spelt out during the early years of its establishment, have continued to guide its development to this day. These were: Political, Unionism, Professionalism and Organisational Development (Govender, 2009:260). The Political Programme was encapsulated in the theme of its second National Congress, namely: “Unionise for Educational Reconstruction and Development”. An important aspect of the political programme was the commitment “to the end of Apartheid in education and the development of an education system which is just and the expression of the will of the people” (SADTU, 1995: 21). This expression of political intent has underpinned SADTU’s political alliances since its birth, particularly with the tripartite alliance of the ANC, COSATU and SACP. SADTU’s second programme was its commitment to unionism wherein it stressed the importance of campaigning for better salaries and the job security of teachers. Thirdly, the Union identified the importance of developing its professional programme, especially with regard to education policy; and fourthly, it committed to a programme of building a strong organization with effective structures. (Govender, 2009)

It is important to get an insight on how SADTU funded these programmes. In August 1993, members of the Education International (EI) consortium met to assess their capacity to support and assist SADTU activities. The EI was and still is the world’s largest global teachers’ union federation with more than 30 million education workers in 171 countries. In this meeting, the consortium agreed that it will shift from supporting SADTU’s operational costs, as it did from 1990 to 1992, to supporting the union’s programmes. It was agreed that SADTU would cover its operational costs from its own resources. The NEC then had to raise funds in order to facilitate workshops on labour issues, and seek ways and means of providing legal assistance to its members.

Overall, SADTU’s programmes were located in the context of transformation. SADTU had to redefine its role in educational restructuring and reform following the struggle for liberation, while simultaneously focussing on challenges relating to gender issues and capacity-building, among others.

Professional programme: To help support educational reconstruction in the country, SADTU realised it had to build its capacity as a union and the professional capability teachers in classrooms. Teachers had to be subject specialists, curriculum developers, and innovators in teaching methods, as well as researchers. The union had to focus on the issues of educational policy and teacher development. In order to help resolve educational crisis issues, SADTU had to develop the union’s policy skills, given the lack of experience in this area among its leaders and membership. There was an early focus on curriculum issues, wherein SADTU drew on some of the earlier experiences of NEUSA in setting up alternative curriculum projects. This led to the founding of SADTU’s Education Desk, which was at the forefront of developing the union’s education priorities and policy responses. This included issues on curriculum, teacher appraisal, and teacher professional development.

The Education Desk received a larger budget than SADTU’s other desks. It was responsible for analysing policy and for generating comments that were a response to
proposed education policies. The desk issued discussion papers on various educational issues. According to the former educational officer in the Northern Cape, Lesego Monyera, we would be assembled at Matthew Goniwe House, SADTU’s headquarters, and we will go through what government … had prepared, and we would craft the union’s response, collective response to whatever draft policy would be on the table.’

It is worth considering that during this period, institutional and educational structures generated in the apartheid era remained largely intact. The central developmental task that faced SADTU as a revolutionary organisation was to influence strategies to be followed in order to change the educational system, which included curricula and subject content matters. With an attempt to reposition itself in relation to the emerging educational policy for a new South Africa, SADTU’s educational desk had to be clear and effective. The manner in which this desk functioned was organically linked with provinces and regions. At the provincial level, each province was divided into regions. Before provincial education convenors attended national meetings, they were required to workshop and conduct intensive engagement at the regional level. Monyera, for instance, remembers:

I was responsible for convening the education desk at the provincial level, so I would call all the then…four regions…I would call and coordinate meetings around this draft white paper, this draft legislation … We will discuss the proposal by the department of education; we will craft our own provincial response towards that [for submission] to a national meeting, where each province was represented by each provincial coordinator.

SADTU’s Education desk worked very closely with the National Education and Training Forum (NETF), which prior to 1994, was the main stakeholder body wherein education problems were debated and attempts at finding solutions were made. The NETF was established to prevent the apartheid government from the unilateral restructuring of education during the transition. The forum was open to all stakeholders with an interest in education and training. The 1993 SADTU National Congress took a resolution to participate in this forum which was viewed by the union as the ‘new site of struggle.’

The NETF Curriculum Committee created a number of syllabus committees that were responsible for cleaning the old syllabus and outdated material. This committee had to consolidate different departmental syllabi into a single national syllabus. Coordination of this task was given to representatives from different organizations. The most important element of this process was public participation. The call for public submissions attracted over 800 written comments. SADTU was very active in this process. With the support of COSAS and SASCO, the old allies of the union, SADTU was able to win debates in the Curriculum Conference that laid the basis for ongoing participatory curriculum processes.

**Gender issues**

The question of gender equity became central to transformation, and given the significant involvement of females in the profession, SADTU placed gender concerns high on its agenda. Teaching was and still is one of the few professions that women occupy in large numbers. In 1991, women made up 71% of the teaching profession in DET primary schools and 42% in secondary schools. Women were rarely promoted to become HODs and principals. They were also discriminated against in terms of salaries and conditions of service. For instance, they were not remunerated the same salary as their male counterparts for similar positions, and did not enjoy the same benefits, such as housing subsidies, medical aid, retirement funds and other fringe benefits. In its attempt to fight for gender equality, SADTU convened a workshop on 27 September 1993, which was attended by representatives from all 15 regions. The workshop was conducted by Pinky Mbowane who was then the Vice President for Gender. It focused on the various issues, including patriarchy and maternity leave, childcare, abortion, harassment at schools and affirmative action.

Organisational development: One of SADTU’s earliest tasks was the building of grassroots structures. This included empowering members with skills to establish branch structures, become effective site stewards, promote membership participation and ensure that all members understood their rights. To this end, SADTU developed the following programmes:

- Setting up local offices
- Grievance handling for site stewards
- Conflict resolution and advocacy skills
- Negotiation skills, presentation skills for meetings and for media
- Education funding issues and budget presentation
- Internal and external communication
- Funding
- Research and technological needs
- Setting up professional development
- Collective bargaining.

![Women members engaged in a Capacity Building Workshop](image)