



## Three decades of putting human rights first

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This July, the ground-breaking Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) is celebrating 30 years of promoting and championing human rights in Namibia.

The landmark birthday will not only focus on the organisation's key achievements over three decades, but will continue its work by hosting a number of public discussions around key issues of the day.

On 2 July, LAC will host a discussion and debate at the Nust mining auditorium titled 'Land Rights – strategies that will work' from 18:00 until 20:00.

On 4 July, a symposium titled 'Education, unemployment and the youth – are we failing our future?' will be hosted at the same venue from 18:00 until 20:00.

LAC is also inviting members of the public for an open office day on 6 July, from between 09:00 until 15:00, at Post Street Mall opposite town square, which will include the opportunity for free legal advice on human rights issues, together with the distribution of educational material on human rights issues.

Speakers will open the discussion at the symposiums where after participants can join in the conversation.

These events are meant to educate and empower and are all offered free of charge.

Amidst turmoil

The LAC was started in July 1988 while many Namibians, especially in the north, faced an avalanche of human rights abuses under South African apartheid rule.

“Human rights abuses were routine and went unpunished. The rule of law was non-existent,” the LAC has stated. Torture, assault, intimidation, arbitrary arrests and detentions without trial, and the destruction of property, livelihoods and lives, were the order of the day.

The organisation noted that “this insufferable situation provide the impetus for the establishment of a public interest, human rights law firm – the Legal Assistance Centre.”

After months of discussions with workers, students and church leaders, and numerous fundraising efforts, Windhoek lawyer, founding director and now chairperson of the LAC, Dave Smuts SC, opened the doors of the new Legal Assistance Centre in Ongwediva on 9 July 1988.

Almost immediately, the LAC was flooded with cases involving human rights abuses, with hundreds of summonses amounting to several thousand Namibia dollars were issued against the South African government in the days after it opened its doors.

“For the first time in its brutal history in Namibia, the South African government had to account for its atrocities in its own courts,” the LAC noted.

In addition to the Windhoek offices, the LAC opened branches in Ongwediva, and established its presence in Tsumeb, Walvis Bay, Rundu, Gobabis, Mariental, Katutura and Opuwo.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/assets/decades-of-putting-human-rights-first2018-06-290.jpg>)

YOUR RIGHTS: The LAC has tackled numerous human right issues over the past 30 years in Namibia. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

Since then, the human rights civil organisation that worked together with government also took on the state if they didn't subscribe to human rights and constitutional laws.

Among a long list of achievements, a landmark case was the sterilisation case whereby health ministry was sterilising women without their consent because of their HIV status.

The LAC has also spearheaded numerous studies and helped shape government policy on environmental, land, gender and family laws in Namibia, with a continued focus "to play a crucial role in the building of a constitutional democracy through its work".

STAFF REPORTER