

## **DASO has come a long way**

**By Yusuf Cassim MPL**

**DASO Federal Leader**

Congress delegates, we are finally here.

Welcome to the first, official and fully compliant DASO Congress.

Whilst it has been a long, challenging and often lonely journey. It has certainly been a worthwhile one!

It is easy to forget where we have come from, and take for granted the work that has been done to get us to where we are today.

My fellow democrats,

There was a time, back when I founded DASO at the Nelson Mandela University, when DASO did not exist as a national organisation. It was a branch of the DA Youth, without any leadership of its own or representation to higher structures. DASO existed on less than 10 campuses.

Today, we have activists on 127 campuses and have constituted 55 valid branches in the run-up to this congress.

This sitting of our congress, brings to fruition, 7 years of work which has included the drafting, certification and adoption of DASO Rules, FLC rulings and re-rulings, 2 National Steering Committees, three attempted congress processes and a host of successes, victories and defeats in between.

I have often been asked why I have been in this position for as long as I have.

Why risk my legacy as the first SRC President in the Eastern Cape and the first DASO Constituency Head, having led DASO to historic victories at Nelson Mandela University, the University of Fort Hare and many TVET College campuses in the Eastern Cape?

Having witnessed first-hand, individuals, who have used ancillary organisations as stepping stones for their own political careers, only to abandon them. Having had the experience of being left to gather the pieces in the face of some who would prefer to see ancillary organisations confined to the dustbin of the DA's history. I pledged to see the mandates bestowed upon us successfully fulfilled, no matter what, no matter how long it takes.

In 2015, all DASO Chairpersons gathered in Johannesburg and elected a team to lead DASO, finalise its rules, and deliver a federal congress. That team included Nazley Sharif, Sam Baynon, Hlanganani Gumbi and myself as the Leader. In 2017, all DASO Chairpersons gathered again in Johannesburg and renewed that mandate.

In my 14 years in the DA, I have never grappled with a more challenging task and I would like to recognise and appreciate the efforts and sacrifices made by the team that was elected, without which, we wouldn't be here today.

I would also like to recognise the efforts of those that came in to assist on the second steering committee as well as the Deputy Chairperson of Federal Council, Thomas Walters, who has been a tireless ally to ancillary organisations over the last decade.

The first hurdle, was getting the rules of an organisation as complex as DASO, drafted and certified by the FLC and adopted by Federal Council. The current rules went through over 40 drafts and 3 FLC panels before their adoption in 2018.

The next hurdle was an FLC ruling that stated that for a member of DASO to be legitimate, they must also be a DA member. With a stroke of a pen, 75% of DASO members lost their membership. You can imagine the chaos, SRC members, Presidents even disenfranchised.

Our structures were in uproar and decided that we cannot entertain attempting a congress in 2018 with 3 quarters of our members disenfranchised.

We were told that an FLC ruling cannot be appealed, it can only be taken on judicial review. This would entail DASO taking the DA to court. We insisted, that the ruling was done without even consulting those who drafted the rules. Therefore the ruling was invalid, null and void to begin with. Finally, in December 2018, the former chairperson of Federal Council, James Selfe, wrote to inform us that indeed the ruling was irregular, and should never have been done in the manner it was done. Finally, justice prevailed and the process was started from afresh with a new FLC panel that found indeed, in terms of our rules, DASO members are not compelled to be DA members.

I have noted that one of the proposed rule amendments that will be considered by congress today is to make it a rule that all DASO members should be DA members. I strongly urge congress to reject this proposal as DASO is that stone in the middle of the pond that many young people need to step on before jumping over to the DA. Before you become a member of the DA, you are just a student on campus looking for a student organisation that will champion your challenges.

Finally, in attempting to put together branches in compliance with all of the requirements set for a DASO congress, the 2019 attempt failed due to a requirement, which we opposed, that all students must produce a certified proof of registration when attending an AGM.

69 Branches were eligible for AGM in 2019, 63 AGMS sat, zero were deemed valid. It reinforced our view that the proof of registration requirement was an unreasonable hurdle and we sought a Federal Executive decision to do away with it. Covid 19 and the subsequent lockdowns saw our 2020 congress attempt dead in the water and the 2021 municipal elections scuppered the attempts made last year.

These delays have hurt our organisations as DASO required a new leadership with a fresh mandate, as far back as 2018, which is the year that DASO peaked under the excellent work done by the DASO leadership.

In 2018, DASO ran its annual Sakh'ngomso on as many as 174 campuses with the national DASO leadership having secured over R300 000 of Sakh'ngomso funding, R1.3 million of SRC Election by-election funding in addition to a national DASO campaigns budget of over half a million rand. DASO governed 3 universities and 12 TVET colleges and canvassed close to 17000 voters in the lead-up to the 2019 General Elections.

The challenge of the new DASO leadership elected today, is to get our organisation back to our peak of 2018, and find a way to surpass it so that we can return to the trajectory of dominance that we once enjoyed.

It will not be easy. And it will require reminding ourselves of why we do what we do.

My father may not have had much growing up but he toiled so that me and my siblings can get a better shot than he had. He put himself through medical school selling stationary and baby formula. Because of the education he was able to access, the doors of opportunity were opened for me.

This is why I have dedicated my life, to fight for every South African to have the opportunity to access a higher education, irrespective of the circumstances of their birth and to have the necessary tools to succeed.

This is what No Student Left Behind means.

Imagine a country where learners can access world-class institutions of higher learning or vocational training based on their talent and hard work rather than the wealth of their families. Imagine that student has the necessary transport, accommodation, textbooks, devices and environment to thrive and compete with anyone worldwide. Imagine graduating into an economy where the skills and knowledge of our graduates can find expression.

We can achieve this, not only by returning to our trajectory of dominance on campuses, but by playing our part in changing the government in 2024.

There are close to 2 million students at the 358 campuses across South Africa. DASO can and must play a historic role in toppling the ANC and ushering in a DA government that will ensure that indeed, No Student is Left Behind.