

INTRODUCTION

On 27 April 1994 the residents of Tembisa Township, in the East Rand, went to the polls to vote for the first time in the non-racial national elections like many other black people across the country. Like many black South Africans, their 'road to democracy' was long and difficult. But while the history of Tembisa in some senses reflects the broader struggle for liberation in South Africa, it arguably was unique in the role it played in the struggle for liberation. Under repressive times, the township had one of the strongest and most influential groups of Black Consciousness proponents who helped to revive and shape politics in the township in the 1970s. This was largely due to the political influence introduced by those removed from Alexandra Township to Tembisa, as was demonstrated when secondary school students took to the streets in solidarity with their counterparts in Soweto a day after the student uprising erupted in Soweto.

The township's singularity was further evident when the competing political ideologies such as that of the African National Congress' inclusive politics and that of the Pan Africanist Congress' exclusive politics emerged. Notwithstanding this, the political momentum in the residents' fight against the government-created structures like the councils was not disrupted. Instead, the residents of the township fought side-by-side to accomplish their demands. In the mid-1980s their relentless struggles forced the township's council to collapse. The residents, through the Tembisa Residents Association, took over the running of the township, fighting criminals and restoring law and order in the township. Despite the initial reluctance by women, particularly older women, to participate in the struggle for liberation, the township was able to form one of the strongest and most active women's organisations. This organization took up local civic grievances and opposed the council. But most importantly, this organization helped to politicize some of the conservative women in the township to join the struggle.

It is for these reasons, and many more not mentioned here, that it is imperative that the history of the townships should be documented. It is hoped that the history of Tembisa, as told by its residents in this booklet, will help to redress the pervasive neglect of the history of the township.