Patrick van Rensburg, 1931–2017, Southern African educator and social activist, was born in Durban, Natal, South Africa, on 3 December 1931. His mother was Cecile Marie-Louise van Rensburg née Lagesse; his father was Peter Maxwell, an English-speaking South African whose family forbade him to marry Cecile.

The boy Patrick spent much of his childhood in Pietermaritzburg in the care of his grandmother, Susanna Marie Lagesse née Louwrens. Her family had been forced into a British concentration camp following the Boer War, a story that she often told. A Catholic by marriage, she raised Patrick in the same church. Their home language was a mixture of English, French, Afrikaans, and Zulu.

Although he chose work over college at age 17, Patrick soon threw himself into correspondence courses and earned a BA from the University of South Africa (UNISA). As he remarked later, his youthful experiences closely reflected the deep divisions in South Africa as a whole.

The anti-apartheid years

At age 21, van Rensburg joined the Department of External Affairs; in February 1956 he was appointed vice-consul to the then-Belgian Congo. Fellow diplomats introduced him to Western humanism and non-racial ideals, even while his own government enacted apartheid. He resigned his post fifteen months later and returned to South Africa.

After several months’ reflection, van Rensburg entered politics and began to organize for the non-racial Liberal Party. He soon displayed leadership beyond his years. Notably, he was several times arrested for arranging political meetings with non-white South Africans.

In 1959 he travelled to Britain, met an old friend and ANC comrade, Tennyson Makiwane, and unexpectedly helped launch the Boycott Movement against his country’s racial policies. The South African establishment condemned him fiercely. When van Rensburg returned to South Africa in March 1960 — one week after the Sharpeville shootings — his passport was confiscated. Within days he was forced to flee to Swaziland, then under British protection.

After some anxious months, van Rensburg and Griffin left for Bechuanaland and settled in the tribal capital of Serowe, where they spoke with Seretse Khama, before going on to Ghana and London. In the UK he received a British passport and met his fiancée, Elizabeth Griffin (1938– ). Early in 1962 he published Guilty Land: The History of Apartheid, which made a strong impression on Western audiences.

Early days in Serowe

Shortly thereafter, van Rensburg and Griffin left for Bechuanaland and settled in the tribal capital of Serowe, home to Seretse Khama and the main Bangwato kgotla. On 29 June they married. They rented a small house from the Mataboge family — previous immigrants from South Africa — and volunteered as tutors at the Simon Ratshosa primary school.
Late in 1962 they received permission to build a secondary school on Serowe’s eastern edge. In February 1963 they opened Swaneng Hill Secondary School to its first students. The School soon became widely known for its policies of non-racialism, self-help, community service, voluntary student labour. It became an educational model in the region for some two decades.

Its progressive curriculum added practical subjects and Development Studies. (The latter was later developed into a full examination subject by Robert Oakeshott, a Swaneng teacher who went on to become the leading advocate of worker-owned enterprises around the world).

In collaboration with the Botswana Ministry of Education, van Rensburg planned and raised money for similar secondary schools in Tonota (Shashe River School) and Mahalapye (Madiba Secondary School). Other public and private schools also went on to encourage, to some degree, voluntary service and manual labour.

Another early initiative was the Swaneng Consumers’ Co-operative, which enjoyed great success for many years. To establish it was a test of van Rensburg’s patience and empathy with local adults, an experience from which he learned a great deal. (It was a relief, however, when Mothusi Seretse accepted to join as its executive).

**Promoting rural development**

In 1965 van Rensburg pioneered a distinctive form of vocational training: on-the-job education with active production. These units he called *brigades*, and they soon included building, farming, textile work, tanning, mechanics, and more. He solicited overseas aid and overseas volunteers to launch and run them, adding to their novelty and effectiveness. Other villages and towns soon followed this example, creating locally controlled brigade centres throughout newly independent Botswana.

(The nation’s Brigades were taken over by the Government after 2009 due to their financial difficulties. At the same time they lost their local control and emphasis on practical, job oriented, production-led training).

Van Rensburg recognized the positive implications for economic development, especially rural development. Together with Joel Pelotona, the local headman, he founded a self-help cooperative, Boiteko, and encouraged others to do the same, especially in the small villages immediately north of Serowe. He recommended that the Consumers’ Co-operative build a hotel. Two years later the famed Tshwaragano Hotel opened its doors high on Serowe’s central hill.

Van Rensburg became increasingly disillusioned with mainstream education and chose to promote less expensive, self-help-based forms of education. Crucially, he forged professional and personal alliances with international aid donors (especially in Scandinavia) and with other pioneers of education-for-development. Later he became associated with broad, international movements for social change. In 1979 he left Serowe to work on these wider projects. The year before, his wife Elizabeth had returned to the UK with their two boys.

Further collaborations with the Botswana Government did not go well. He was asked to be Vice-Chairman of the Rural Development Commission to promote village-level growth. He soon realised, however, that the committee mostly wished to extend private investment to Botswana’s communal areas, including fenced ranches. He resigned in protest, angering the ruling Botswana Democratic Party.

Making a mark on the international stage

In 1980, with backing from the Swedish government, van Rensburg launched the Foundation for Education with Production (FEP) to spread his vision internationally. Several FEP projects appeared in newly independent Zimbabwe. The Foundation published a respected educational Journal from 1982 to 1996. (In 1998 it was absorbed into the Southern African Review of Education with EWP, a collaboration that continued until 2004).

In 1981 Patrick van Rensburg received the prestigious Right Livelihood Award from the RLA Foundation in Stockholm, a great international honour. From contacts made there, he was able to introduce the practice of permaculture to Botswana. A community trust in Serowe continues to promote it.

At this time also he met his second companion, Rosemary Forbes (1950– ), with whom he fathered a daughter, Joanna Boitumelo (1986– ).

In 1984, together with a team of dedicated young Batswana, who included long-term associates Methaetsile Leepile and Titus Mbuya, van Rensburg launched a weekly national newspaper, Mmegi. After several years of struggling, it eventually became Botswana’s most important independent media house. This in turn became one of the founders of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA). These two organisations — long independent of van Rensburg’s leadership — have played a profound role in Botswana’s recent history.

Less successfully, and to his later regret, van Rensburg joined a promising left-wing political party, the Botswana National Front (BNF). In the mid-1990s, due to his friendship with its leader, Kenneth Koma, he sat on its executive committee. When the BNF broke apart at its 1998 Congress, van Rensburg was forced to end both the friendship and any further political participation.

After the capitulation of apartheid in 1990, van Rensburg returned quietly to South Africa and initiated some modest urban and rural projects, most of them in Johannesburg. He lectured on Education with Production and briefly hoped that it might be included in the great post-apartheid school reforms. In 1991 he became
the first honorary member of the Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society, a professional body that continues to promote his work.

More importantly, van Rensburg became a key resource person for the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in Sweden, helping them to organize many international seminars. His thinking reflected both the Foundation’s advocacy of a “third way” of development and his own commitment to socialism from the ground up. He read eclectically, from Mao Zedong to Paolo Freire.

Legacy of a visionary

Van Rensburg consistently rejected globalization theory — especially its reliance on foreign investment — in favour of domestic capital accumulation and local control. Ultimately, however, the post-independence elites of Southern Africa opted for private investor-driven development. He took this disappointment in a near-personal way, leading to some years of private bitterness.

Notable publications from the post-Swaneng period include Looking Forward from Serowe, a special supplement to the journal Education with Production (1984), Making Education Work: The What, Why and How of Education with Production (2001), and “No Longer a Guilty Land”, a newspaper column published in Mmegi newspaper, 29 April 2005. In this article van Rensburg gave a rare expression of regret for how African independence had unfolded.

In 2003 van Rensburg moved back to Botswana, pursued a low-key life in Gaborone, and contributed to Mmegi. He wished to re-publish Making Education Work and to finish his autobiography, but neither of these projects came to fruition. Although his class struggle-based view of social change had estranged him from centrist institutions, it gave him an iconic position among a younger generation of progressives.

Ten years later, suffering from dementia, he moved from Gaborone to Serowe to be in the care of his son Mothusi. It was a return to the yard that he had built for his family more than 40 years before. Patrick van Rensburg died peacefully at his home on 23 May 2017.

During van Rensburg’s years in Botswana, the country underwent spectacular changes. His most important legacy is the network of voluntary community trusts that built upon his approach. Found everywhere in Botswana, these trusts work for local community development and improvement. Beginning with the Serowe Youth Development Association in the mid-1960s, such a model was decisively set into motion by van Rensburg’s energy, commitment, and example.

He is survived by Elizabeth van Rensburg; by sons Thomas and Mothusi van Rensburg; by Rosemary Forbes; and by daughter Joanna Forbes-van Rensburg. There are three grandchildren.