

Towards a rights-based social protection system in Botswana

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Abstract

Social protection in Botswana has metamorphosed through a number of fairly distinct phases. The paper unpacks the distinct features of each phase, and urges the government to embed social protection in the country's constitution to realise a truly *rights-based* social protection system. During the pre-Independence (*Botho*) Phase (1900-1965) Botswana (then Bechuanaland) functioned as a British Protectorate and a majority of the people relied largely on a non-formal social protection system predicated on a subsistence economy. The system, driven by the notion of *botho*, tended to be self-regulating, with emphasis on solidarity and cooperation, imploring individuals and families to care for the needy in their midst out of a moral obligation (Rankopo et al 2007). The system flourished both during the colonial era and in the early years of independence.

The post- Independence phase ran between 1966 and 1975. At independence in 1966, the country was counted among the poorest nations of the world. A Transitional Plan for Social and Economic Development (1966-69) guided government interventions in both economic and social welfare issues (Ntseane, 2007). The country operated with grossly insufficient resources with service provision being apparently ensconced in the notion of *charity*. Where charity is the guiding philosophy, provision of resources is at the discretion of the state (Plagerson, 2014) meaning, in the case of Botswana, only the deserving poor received handouts. Thus, only a limited number of people across the country received benefits (Bitso, 2012). The state, with limited consultation, decided to whom, and for how long, a social protection benefit would be granted. The state also decided on the nature and size of the benefit.

The promulgation of the 3rd National Development Plan (1970 – 1975), appeared to further propel the *charity* philosophy, with the government expressing its intention to introduce a formal

social protection system. Initiatives introduced included a Home Economics Unit, Youth Brigades, Youth Clubs, and the Basarwa Development Programme (Ntseane, 2007). The discovery of massive diamond deposits in the 1970s ushered in an era of significantly improved resource base which set the tone for improved social provision (Bauer & Taylor, 2005). The National Development Plan period 1973-1981 inter alia, witnessed the launching of a social protection regime that would address the prevailing social challenges, including poverty and destitution (Ntseane & Solo, 2007).

A period which can be referred to as the '*caring state*' phase ran from 1975 to 1997. Thanks to the diamonds boom, the government gradually shifted from providing social protection on the platform of *charity* to embracing the *caring state* philosophy. The Nordic Welfare States have carried the label "*caring states*" (Leira, 1994) because of their commitment to catering for the basic needs of all their citizens. In the case of Botswana, the notion of a *caring state* philosophy is aptly articulated in the country's Vision 2016 (launched in 1997), one of whose pillars emphasized the need to promote a '*compassionate, just and caring nation*'. This policy document spelt out the country's preferred development path, with a brief including a resolve to advocate for the provision of "*an adequate and dignified safety net for those who are in poverty in a way that does not encourage dependency and provides a means of escape from the poverty trap and a return to productive society.*" (GoB, 1997).

RHVP (2011:1) noted that Botswana boasts of one of the most comprehensive state-led social protection regimes in the southern African region, and that "*Programming for poor, vulnerable and excluded groups is comprehensive by African standards....*". The vigorous promotion of initiatives that include the Labour Intensive Public Works Programme (LIPWP), the National Destitute Policy (1980), the World War II Veterans Programme, the Old Age Pension Scheme, the Community Home Based Care Programme (1997), the Short Term Plan of Action for Care of Orphans (STPA) (1999), among others, all point to embracing of the *caring state* philosophy (Mupedziswa & Ntseane, 2012). Also launched were the National Strategy on Poverty Reduction (2003); the Poverty Eradication Programme (2010); the Poverty Eradication Road Map (2010); the National Guidelines on the care of Orphans and Vulnerable Children (2010); the National Policy on Care for People with Disabilities etc, among others.

The current phase can be said to have been launched around 1997. Through good governance and fiscal discipline, Botswana has transformed itself from one of the poorest countries in the world to attaining upper middle income status. In the 1990s the country's real GDP growth averaged 8.5 percent and remained buoyant at 6 per cent in the 2000s (RHVP, 2011). Today, Botswana is one of the few countries in Africa that self-finance (its) social protection programmes (4% of GDP in 2012/2013). While considerable numbers of citizens have benefited from a wide range of policies and acts that address social protection, shortfalls have been identified and these have included lack of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, lack of clear mechanisms for effective redistribution of the national wealth, lack of coordination, poor implementation, ineffective utilization of resources and lack of accountability (Ntseane & Solo, 2007; Mupedziswa & Ntseane, 2013).

Perhaps the key question that ought to be addressed is: What does Botswana need to do to ensure the march towards a rights-based approach continues to its logical conclusion? RHVP (2011:3) noted that, *"While most Botswana have benefited from these achievements, the new wealth is very unevenly distributed and many individuals and groups (remain) marginalized economically, socially and/or geographically"*. This seems to suggest that Botswana's social protection regime is not yet predicated on a rights-based approach. According to Plagerson (2014) where social protection is seen as an act of social justice, it is rolled out as a right. In such cases social protection tends to be embedded in the country's constitution, backed up by an appropriate legislative framework. In the case of Botswana, most of the initiatives are simply provided through policy guidelines (RHVP, 2011). Apparently of the 10 social protection programmes in place, only 3 were supported by formal policy statements; with the remaining seven operating on the basis of (mere) guidelines (RHVP, 2011:7). Such a scenario is inconsistent with a rights-based approach, given that it breeds leakages. A recent BIDPA/World Bank study established that, *"While Botswana has many social protection programmes, some of them are rather small relative to the target group they intend (to cover) or to the number of poor people, which limits their effectiveness"* (Balise, 2014:2).

In conclusion, while enormous progress has been made in efforts to provide comprehensive social protection in Botswana, challenges remain evident. It is the argument of the author that, to

make marked headway, it would be pertinent for the authorities to ensure the social protection system is embedded in the country's constitution as such a move would ensure the government can be held accountable. This, in turn, would ensure that decisions such as who gets what benefits and for how long, would then not remain simply a preserve of the state alone. The country would have realized the seemingly elusive goal of a *rights-based* social protection system.

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