

COMMENTARY

Role of local government in Botswana for effective service delivery: Challenges, prospects and lessons

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Keshav C. Sharma

University of Botswana
Gaborone, Botswana



This paper begins with an explanation of the nature of local government in Botswana, its structures, and their functions and accomplishments since independence. It then proceeds to look at the challenges, and considers measures for meeting them. It ends by looking at future prospects and draws some lessons.

1. Local Government Structures in Botswana

Botswana is known as a country in Africa which has operated within the political framework of democracy since independence and has promoted local government as an instrument of decentralization and public participation for local level governance and service delivery. Local government in Botswana stands on four pillars: (a) Councils (City Councils, Town Councils and District Councils); (b) District Administration, headed by District Commissioners; (c) Land Boards, created after independence for allocation of tribal land; and (d) tribal administration, headed by Chiefs as traditional leaders (Sharma 2005a, 2005b).

City and Town Councils in urban areas and District Councils in rural areas as agencies of devolution derive their authority, theoretically, from statutes and perform functions allocated

by statutes. Their main functions are primary education, primary health, roads, village water supply, community development and social welfare. Although these are statutory bodies, their autonomy and capacity are limited by political and administrative realities.

The District Commissioner heads the District Administration and operates as a representative of central government in the district. This office is an instrument of de-concentration and performs the functions allocated by the central government. The main function of the District Commissioner is to coordinate rural development activities at the district level, primarily as chairperson of the District Development Committee (DDC). This committee has representation from the District Council, Land Board and Tribal Administration, as well as district level representatives of various government ministries, and has a central role in coordination of district level development plans.

Land Boards were created after independence. Half the members of Land Boards are elected by the community at *Kgotla* (traditional village assemblies) and the other half are appointed by the Minister of Lands. The Land Boards hold the tribal land in trust and allocate it to citizens for residential, agricultural or commercial purposes. The boards took over these powers from the Chiefs. They derive their powers from statutes and work in cooperation with the tribal administration, District Council and District Commissioner.

The traditional institution of Chiefs played a significant role during the pre-colonial and colonial periods and has continued to exist after independence as an integral part of local government machinery. The Chiefs play a significant role as chairmen of *Kgotla*, a traditional forum for consultation and two-way communication between the government and the community on the formulation and implementation of public policies and local level development plans. Chiefs also preside over customary courts which handle more than 80% of cases tried in the country (Sharma 2009). The House of Chiefs (*Ntlo ya Dikhozi*) is a forum where the Chiefs articulate their views on matters of interest to them (Sharma 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b).

2. Botswana's Accomplishments in Local Government

Botswana has a commendable track record regarding the growth and functioning of local government in the African context (Sharma 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b). It has a conducive and enabling democratic political environment in which local government can develop. There is peace, stability and the rule of law across the country. There is also freedom of expression, criticism and opposition. Public participation in public policy making, development planning and implementation has grown steadily. Political leadership has demonstrated a commitment to promote decentralization as evidenced by the establishment of Presidential Commissions in 1977 and 2001. Local level political leadership has grown steadily. District Administration displays improved administrative capacities.

Land Boards are now well established having gone through initial hostility from the Chiefs and limited administrative capacity. They are politically neutral and have their own Land Board service of officials. Traditional authorities (Chiefs) have been well integrated into the public administration machinery for local governance (Sharma 1999, 2003a, 2008). Kgotla also play a role in local level development activities. Customary courts are popular with the community as they are not too technical, inexpensive and comprehensible to the ordinary tribesmen. Decentralized (district level) development planning has improved considerably (Sharma 2000a, 2000b, 2004). Problems such as HIV/AIDS are being confronted with commitment and determination. Nevertheless, local governance continues to be faced with a number of significant constraints and challenges which have to be confronted.

3. Challenges

One of the greatest challenges is that of limited capacity. Although their strength and capacity have grown steadily since independence, local governments are still not able to perform their roles and discharge their functions as well as expected. Their autonomy is limited and they remain unable to manage essential functions without assistance from central government ministries such as Education, Health, Works and Water Affairs (Sharma 1997). The central government also plays a dominant role in formulation of policies and development plans and their implementation. Although the councils are notionally autonomous statutory bodies, in reality one could say in many ways they operate like de-

concentrated agencies of the Ministry of Local Government, given the extent of control and direction.

The councils do not have significant independent sources of revenue and their entire development expenditure is met by the central government. The central government also meets 97% of the recurrent expenditure of rural councils and about 80% of that of urban councils (Sharma, 2003b).

Qualified manpower is scarce in the country, and local authorities are faced with big challenges related to human resource development and management. As they were not able to attract, remunerate, retain and train their own staff independently, the central government organized the Unified Local Government Service (ULGS) which is now known as Local Government Service Management (LGSM). Through this service the central government recruits, posts, transfers, disciplines, trains, promotes and regulates the conditions of service of staff in local authorities. This arrangement helps the local authorities to get qualified manpower, gives them attractive conditions of service, and facilitates training opportunities; however, it also strengthens central control and inhibits local government autonomy (Sharma 1997, 2005a, 2005b). It results in the accountability and loyalty of staff in local government being to the central administration of LGSM instead of the council. However, there has been some decentralization in human resource management, and the councils have gradually been given increased authority to take decisions related to their staff. Human resource management departments in councils have also been strengthened, but adequate human resource development, management and autonomy will remain a major challenge for the foreseeable future.

Local level political leadership has a significant role in strengthening local government. Local level leadership has grown since independence but the capacity of many councillors leaves much to be desired. The grassroots organizations such as Village Development Committees need to be more active and community participation strengthened. Decentralization of authority from the central government has been primarily confined to the bureaucrats in local level organizations, and the effective participation of local politicians has remained limited. Although there has been considerable progress in participatory

development planning, effective bottom-up processes remain a distant dream in spite of proclamations, and planning continues to be essentially top-down. The integration of district level plans and vertical and horizontal coordination also need to be improved (Sharma 2000a, 2000b).

Productivity of local level organizations remains another challenge despite various productivity enhancing measures such as work improvement teams and performance management systems. Declining standards of integrity are also a matter of concern (Sharma 1998). The administrative machinery's accountability to the people needs to be strengthened, and administration needs to become more responsible, responsive and sensitive to people's needs and expectations.

4. The Way Forward: Measures to Meet the Challenges

Decentralization will not be fully effective and local government organizations will not be strong unless their capacities are further developed. Efforts to strengthen decentralization should therefore be directed at building the capacity of local government organizations. This requires clarity of policy and a commitment to its implementation. People have to be taken on board and policies *for* them have to be made *with* them.

Capacity development requires financial autonomy and sound management of finances. The local authorities need to reduce their heavy dependence on the central government and develop their own independent sources of revenue (Sharma, 2003b). They will not be autonomous unless they make a significant advance in that direction. It is not only independent sources of revenue that are required: sound financial management is even more important. The local authorities must ensure that their finances are not mismanaged and standards of integrity and accountability are maintained. There has to be zero tolerance for corruption and mechanisms of control and accountability have to be strengthened. Audit machinery and bodies like the Local Government Public Accounts Committee (LGPAC), Directorate on Economic Crime and Corruption (DCEC) and the Ombudsman have to play more effective roles (Sharma 1998, 2005a, 2005b).

Capacity development requires strengthening of human resource development and management in local government. The local authorities need enhanced decentralization in human resource management, and human resource departments in the councils need to be strengthened further. The councils need to give closer attention to manpower planning and human resource development measures. Morale and motivation need to be lifted to enhance productivity, and measures such as work improvement teams, performance management systems and performance based rewards adopted more widely and sincerely. Other productivity enhancing measures, such as contracting out to the private sector for service delivery, public-private partnerships etc. also need to be pursued to check the expansion of bureaucracy (Sharma 2007a, 2007b).

The performance of local level political leaders could be strengthened through organization of workshops, seminars and published material which could enhance their knowledge and understanding of their expected roles. Grass-roots organizations such as Village Development Committees (VDCs) need more support from higher levels and could go through similar training programs to get better informed. They need to come closer to the community to be able to understand their felt needs, problems and expectations. Decentralization cannot be effective if it stops at the district level. It should be taken further down to the village levels and the current mindset about the significance of VDCs has to change to make them more effective instruments for enlisting people's participation in local level governance (Sharma 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b).

The Botswana Association of Local Authorities (BALA) could play a more effective role in promoting decentralization by serving as a strong pressure group at the central government level on behalf of local authorities. It could undertake capacity development activities on behalf of local authorities (such as organization of workshops for councillors) to strengthen leadership (Sharma 2005a, b).

5. Prospects and Lessons

Prospects for decentralization and growth of local government in Botswana are encouraging. Local level democracy has taken root in the country, and central and local government organizations are working jointly for the realization of Botswana's Vision 2016 and National

Development Plan. Challenges are being addressed and capacities are being strengthened. Commitment of political and bureaucratic leadership is growing (Sharma 1996).

Botswana's experience offers some important lessons. Creation of an enabling environment of democracy, peace and the rule of law is a prerequisite for decentralization and strengthening of local government. If decentralization is to be meaningful and to promote effective participation of people in local level governance, it has to be taken to the grass-roots in the villages instead of stopping at the district level. Decentralization has also to be taken to the people and their political representatives rather than being limited to bureaucrats in the local level organizations. Local political leadership and grass roots organizations such as VDCs therefore need to be strengthened alongside the elected councils. Vertical and horizontal communication and coordination have to be improved to strengthen bottom-up planning and integration of local plans in to the national development plan. The people need and deserve accountable, responsible, responsive, sensitive, productive administration at the local level. The political and bureaucratic leadership at the national and local levels have to demonstrate their commitment to take up this challenge to ensure that the people get that sort of administration.

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