

# IDRC FEATURE

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## BOTSWANA'S BRIGADES PROVIDE PRACTICAL TRAINING FOR DEVELOPMENT

by Ernest Chilisa

Developing countries often give priority to Western-style educational programs to eradicate illiteracy and create an educated elite, largely of urban orientation. This type of educational system, inherited from colonial administrations, has achieved much but it has also created problems for the emerging states of Africa. Botswana has not been an exception.

One of the problems is the erosion of the people's spirit of self-reliance, self-confidence and independence occurring because of the severing of rural connections. Another is the creation of an unskilled labour force. Most developing countries are faced today with mass unemployment and an acute shortage of skilled labour.

The brigade movement in Botswana is a unique attempt to overcome these shortcomings of the formal education system. It aims to provide primary school leavers with vocational training geared to the needs of the local area. By offering training for gainful employment, it fosters rural development. Training and productive work are combined so that the sale of products helps cover training costs. Academic and vocational training, both in the classroom and on-the-job, lead to the adoption of development-oriented values, knowledge and skills.

Despite its name, the brigade movement has never had any involvement with military or para-military activities. It was founded in 1965 by Patrick van Rensburg, a former South African diplomat who fled to Botswana in the early

1960s. He quickly realized that Botswana lacked brick-layers, carpenters and other tradesmen, and that the traditional secondary schools could not produce them. Moreover, although additional secondary schools were being built, space was lacking for more than 40 percent of primary school leavers. In March 1965 he started the Sewore Builders Brigade, named after a similar movement, The Workers Brigades, instituted in Ghana during the Nkrumah period to employ young men and women in productive activities. Since then the brigades have been mushrooming throughout Botswana.

A "Brigade centre" in Botswana is a cluster of brigades organized under a single local governing authority, in a single locality. To date there are over 40 brigades -- builders, auto-mechanics, carpenters, plumbers, leather tanners, textile workers, etc., all trades that were previously unknown in the country -- and 15 brigade centres, many in rural areas. Enrolment is increasing each year as more school leavers enter the labour market: 85 percent of the students are men aged from 15 to 20. By 1981, it is expected that 24 brigade centres will train over 3000 students.

The training program includes academic subjects such as mathematics, English, development studies and science. Courses last for three years, except for textiles and farming which last two years. After completion, graduates are given certificates that are recognized both by the government and private sector. Some trades even sit for government-sponsored exams.

A survey carried out in 1976 showed that 83 percent of brigade graduates found jobs in their specialty in less than three months after completing their course and that 50 percent of them were earning better salaries than graduates from formal schools. Some graduates form themselves into syndicates and operate as sub-contractors in building or related industries. A number of primary schools have been built by brigades, at a lower cost than if other labour had been used. The work has been excellent. Two hotels have been built using local materials and are owned by brigade centres.

The welding brigade achieved a technical breakthrough when it invented the "Makgonatsohle" tool carrier, an ox-drawn multi-purpose implement for

ploughing, planting, cultivating and hauling crops and machinery. This implement is now recommended by the Botswana government to the farming communities.

The brigades have also played a major role in lessening Botswana's dependence on neighbouring countries for certain goods and services. School uniforms, which used to be imported, are now made locally. The pottery brigades are producing attractive products for the tourist market. Soon, the first bicycle plant operated by a brigade will go into operation.

The Brigade program is designed in such a way that the students cover a part of their training costs through part-time work. Profits are put back into the movement to improve the infrastructure. The movement is funded by the brigades themselves, loans and grants from agencies such as the World Bank, the British and Swedish development agencies, and by private donors like the Mennonite Central Committee and the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada.

The Botswana government has begun to subsidize the training activities by initially paying half of the instructors salaries and providing an annual training allowance of P 185 per trainee (approximately US \$260). When trained instructors are not available in Botswana, personnel are provided by the US Peace Corps, the Danish Volunteer Service and the Canadian University Service Overseas.

While the government has not engaged itself in the brigades in the past, it is recognized as an important feature in rural development and non-formal education. The National Development Plan for 1976-1981 provides for P 1.9 million (\$2.6 million US) for its development. Already a P 300 000 brigade centre is being built in Gaborone to act as a focal point and coordinating centre for all brigades.

The extension of the brigade movement has become all the more important since Botswana plans to introduce free education in 1980. The secondary schools will not be able to cope with a larger number of primary school leavers. Botswana's brigades may be the only alternative for the 50 percent of the students who cannot be accommodated in the formal secondary school system.