

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BOTSWANA

A Paper Prepared for the Commonwealth Local Government Forum

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# FRAMEWORK OF CENTRAL-LOCAL GOVERNMENT RELATIONS IN BOTSWANA AND ENHANCING OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAPACITY

## ABSTRACT

After outlining briefly the nature and role of local government in Botswana, the paper points out the major characteristics of the framework of central-local government relations in this country and the factors limiting the local government capacities such as limited strength of financial resources of local authorities, nature of Local Government Service Management, nature of decentralized development planning, district level political leadership, grass-roots participation, standards of integrity and commitment of bureaucratic leadership. The paper then proceeds to the discussion of local government capacity enhancing efforts, particularly measures for strengthening their human and financial resources and the role of Botswana Association of Local Authorities. The paper ends with some reflections on measures which could be considered for strengthening central-local government relations in good governance.

1. **The Case for Decentralization in Good Governance:** During the past few years the wind of change for decentralization has been blowing in Africa. Demands for participation in government and fair share in development activities have increased. Efforts for strengthening of democracy in Africa have to be complemented by invigorating the institutions and process of decentralization. Local Government in Africa has a special role in this context. The significance of Local Government as an instrument of democratic decentralization, development and good governance is being realized increasingly. Throughout Africa moves are being made to give more power to the people at the grass-roots. Decentralization and Local Government need to be promoted due to political, economic, social, geographical and administrative advantages. (Sharma: 1993,1994) Local Government as an instrument of decentralization assumes additional significance as it facilitates involvement of people in the formulation and implementation of development plans and promotes self-help. Decentralized and participatory government can also be an important element in good governance.

2. **Nature and Role of Local Government in Botswana:** Although Local Government normally means elected statutory bodies of devolution like urban and rural councils, this term in Botswana is commonly used in the context of four major organizations of devolution as well as deconcentration: District and Urban Councils; LandBoards; Tribal Administration; and District Administration. District Administration (headed by District Commissioner) an instrument of deconcentration, exercises delegated authority from the central government and performs central

coordinating role in the decentralized district level planning and development administration. The District Commissioner chairs the District Development Committee which consists of the senior representatives of district level organizations involved in development activities. Landboards, new post-independence institutions (of elected and nominated members) hold the tribal land in trust and allocate it for agricultural, industrial, commercial, residential and general development purposes (these functions were formerly undertaken by traditional chiefs). Tribal Administration is headed by traditional Chiefs whose powers have been reduced but who continue to exercise considerable influence on tribesmen in the rural areas. The Chiefs provide leadership in maintaining customs and traditions, serve as spokesmen of their tribes on issues of customary nature, preside over customary courts (which handle over 80% criminal and civil cases in the country), and preside over KGOTLA (traditional meeting place) where community views are sought. One of the major components of local government in Botswana consists of District and Urban Councils. The discussion of central-local government relations in this paper is focussed on these statutory bodies. There are nine District Councils, four Town Councils, one City Council and one Township Authority in Botswana. Election for the councillors are held every five years. The Minister of Local Government, Lands and Housing also has the authority to nominate some members. The statutory responsibility of Councils include primary education, primary health care, ungazetted roads and rural village water supply. These responsibilities cover related items such as sanitation services, social and community development, administering Self-Help Housing Agencies, municipal abattoirs, markets, parks, cemeteries, etc. They are also responsible for labour intensive drought relief projects, trade licensing, matimela (stray cattle), remote area development, fire extinction and prevention, and physical planning. The Ministry of Local Government, Lands, and Housing (MLGLH) is the focal point in the central government for planning and coordinating of local authorities. This ministry coordinates national policies related to local government activities and liaises with other central government ministries. This ministry retains the final power of approval over most activities relating to local authorities.

Representative local government in Botswana, as we understand it today, comprising councillors elected on the principle of universal adult franchise, was introduced only after Independence. Local Government in Botswana has evolved out of tribal administration which performed limited



local government functions before independence. The system grew under tribal administration during the colonial period with the introduction in 1956 of Tribal Councils under the chairmanship of the chiefs of major tribes. These Tribal Councils included members nominated by the Chief, members elected at the Kgotla (Village Assembly) and chairman and other nominated members of the lower-level district councils within the tribal area. The District Councils within the tribal area constituted second and lower-tier of local government and were subordinate to the Tribal Councils. These district councils comprised subordinate tribal authorities as chairmen, some nominated members and some elected at the Kgotla. This pattern of local government continued up to the time of independence when the Government decided to introduce the present system of District and Town Councils controlled by the elected representatives of the people. Following the principles of universal adult franchise and organized within the framework of multi-party democracy, elections for the councils have been held at regular, 5-year intervals along with those Parliament. As a result of free elections, representatives of different political parties have won elections in different councils. In 1984, the Botswana National Front (opposition party in Parliament) won the majority of seats in the Gaborone City Council and has retained its majority in this Council since then. In 1994 General Elections the strength of opposition increased considerably in different councils and it formed the government in seven urban and district councils.

3. **The Framework of Central-Local Government Relations:** A system of democratic decentralization has to be so organized that the relations between the central and local government organizations are characterized by a balance between centralization and decentralization of authority and functions. While the central government has to delegate some of its authority, and encourage autonomy of local authorities, it has to continue to retain some responsibilities relating to control, direction, supervision and guidance particularly during the infant stage of development of local authorities. Central government has to retain the functions which the local government may not be able to undertake due to the magnitude of resources or expertise required. It may have to provide the local government with financial and manpower resources and technical assistance of different kinds without which these bodies may not be able to perform their functions. It may have to guide these bodies on the nationally defined priorities

for utilization of scarce resources. Some central controls may be needed for maintaining nationally accepted standards of performance and integrity and for sound management of finances. Over and above all, the Centre may have to play a role in developing the administrative capacities of local level institutions through various measures which could include training, manpower development and gradually increasing autonomy.

The relations between the central and local government in Botswana have grown within a framework of freedom and multi-party democracy. Although the local authorities have grown in Botswana considerably over a period of times since independence in terms of their manpower and functions and finance handled by them (they employ about 11,000 people and provide about 25% of total government employment), their overall capacities remain limited in providing services, planning and implementing development projects, and taking over additional responsibilities. The Central Government continues to play a dominant role in the growth and functioning of local government. The central-local government relations in Botswana need to be seen in the context of (a) strength of financial resources of local government; (b) availability of qualified staff and nature of the Local Government Service Management (LGSM); (c) mechanisms for decision-making related to decentralized district level development planning; (d) local level political leadership; (e) contribution of central government ministries to the functions of Local Authorities; (f) vertical and horizontal linkages; (g) grass-roots participation; and (i) standards of integrity and commitment of bureaucratic leadership at local level.

3.(a) **Strength of Financial Resources of Local Government**: The financial strength of local government in Botswana has been extremely limited. Although their recurrent expenditure has been growing steadily, their own independent sources of revenue have remained limited. The difference between their expenditure and revenue is financed by the Central Government, through increased contributions from the Central Government Budget (earlier known as deficit grants and now known as revenue-support grants) and for Urban Councils through loans from Central Government. In 1988/89 deficit grants amounted to nearly P80 million, or roughly 96 per cent of District Councils' total recurrent funding. This amount of deficit grants rose to P164 million in 1992/93. The yield from limited existing sources of revenue becomes small due to ineffective

administration as can be discerned from the high default rates and arrears in service levies and building materials loans on Self-Help-Housing Areas and on property rates in the Urban Councils. As one of the Audit Reports pointed out: "In 1989/90, rates income which was P11.87 million, represented 64% of all urban authorities income (excluding deficit grant). The rates arrears at 31st March 1990 were P4.5 million, which is 24% of all rate income due" (1992:12). The revenue base for the District Councils is much weaker than that of the Urban Authorities. It includes abattoir fees, beer levy, clinic fees, matimela (charge for keeping stray cattle until their owners collect them), rents, sale of consumables, trade licenses, and water and sanitation fees). In 1989/90, these amounted to just over 5% of the total expenditure budget for the District Councils (NDP:455). New, independent sources of revenue for the local authorities have not been identified. Abolition of Local Government Tax in 1988 reduced further the independent revenue base of these local authorities. With this kind of financial strength and dependence on the Central Government, the local authorities are limited in the range and magnitude of their activities and in exercising autonomy with regard to their own policies, plans and projects.

### 3.(b) Availability of Qualified Staff and Nature of Local Government Service Management

**(LGSM):** Scarcity of qualified staff has been a major constraint of local authorities. Due to this scarcity, local authorities have faced problems in planning and prioritising increased responsibilities. Particular bottlenecks have been caused by shortage of qualified professional and technical personnel such as engineers, architects, accountants. The Director of Local Government Audit in his report submitted in 1992 rightly made the following observation with regard to shortage of staff in local authorities: "I have observed while visiting Local Authorities around the country that generally the staffing position in these authorities is worsening from year to year instead of improving.....the problem embraces a number of departments but in particular the Treasury Department", (Audit Report 1992:27).

As the local authorities at the time of their creation did not have the capacity to attract, remunerate and train qualified staff independently, the Central Government decided to provide them with such staff through a separate service called Unified Local Government Service, now known as Local Government Service Management. All the permanent and contract staff in the



local authorities were provided to them through this central service. The Establishment Secretary based at the headquarters in the MLGLH was made responsible for recruitment, training, promotions, postings, transfers, discipline and conditions of service of all employees belonging to this service.

Through a unified service such as this one, the local authorities were able to get qualified staff at salaries which they could not pay independently. The staff belonging to the pool could have better training opportunities and promotion prospects and better conditions of service generally. The staff were also insulated from local politics. However, this arrangement strengthened the central control over the local authorities and limited their autonomy. The local authorities due to this arrangement have little control over their own staff who are accountable to and have their loyalty to the Establishment Secretary of Department of Local Government Service Management (DLGSM) instead of the collective body of councillors which represents the local population. The autonomy of the councils and their capacity to make their own policies or to take independent decisions is limited as they receive explicit or implicit approval, direction, control or guidance from above.

In spite of the ongoing efforts of the DLGSM, the training opportunities for the staff in local authorities remain limited. Although the conditions of service of LGSM staff have improved considerably over the last few years and salary scales are similar to those in the civil service, the morale of the staff in the councils is not high. This is mainly due to limited training opportunities, promotion prospects and continuing image of lower esteem compared to the civil service. Attracting and retaining competent staff continues to remain a difficult problem due to likely postings in rural or remote areas. Greater incentives are required to attract and retain the university graduates and brighter council secretaries who are able to rise above their present rank and salary within the council administration. Due to vacancies and limited competence of subordinates, staff in some supervisory positions are heavily worked and need concrete incentives for reward and appreciation.



For rationalizing the organizational structure to improve productivity, the O & M and related exercises need to be implemented expeditiously with the consent of the concerned parties. Manpower development and training plans need to be formulated with rational criteria at macro and micro levels for a longer term perspective to enhance the existing limited administrative capacities of the local authorities.

3.(c) **Mechanisms for Decision Making Related to District Level Development Planning:** The local government organizations are expected to make a significant input into the decentralized district level development planning through their own projects which have to be prioritized, elaborated, accepted and implemented through the various mechanisms involving horizontal and vertical linkages. Effectiveness of decentralization and capacities of local level organizations with regard to development planning are limited due to the problems related to formulation, implementation, monitoring, guidance and vertical-horizontal two-way communication. (Sharma, 1992)

The nature of development planning in Botswana, in spite of the declared intentions for 'bottom-up planning' continues to be what is generally known as 'top-down planning.' The policies are determined at the central government level and major decisions for resource allocation are also taken there. The contribution of district level organizations still remains limited although it has increased steadily during the last years. The district plans are co-ordinated under the umbrella of District Development Committee chaired by the District Commissioner, but their successful operation depends on effective coordination of activities of different district level organizations participating in the exercise. This coordination means harmonization of activities for the purposes of ensuring the optimum collective contribution to the achievement of a common end and required eradication of duplication, conflict, friction, overlapping and ambiguity as well as development of team spirit, complementarity and mutual support. The existing situation in the districts needs to be improved in these respects.

Consultation between the central government and the district level organizations generally takes the form of explanation of policies and elaboration of plans formulated at higher levels. The link

and communication between the Centre and the Districts is somewhat ineffective as the district level staff do not receive adequate, satisfactory, timely information required. Professional calibre and training of concerned staff need to be strengthened as well as their commitment. The central government needs to display greater sensitivity for the problems, needs and priorities of districts and give them guidance with positive interest.

3.(d) **Local Level Political Leadership**: The nature of political leadership in local government has a bearing on the capabilities of councils and their effectiveness. The calibre of elected politicians has often been a target of criticism. Although no generalizations could be made in this regard as there are able, as well as not able, political leaders who get elected or nominated, the position regarding the qualifications of many local level politicians is not encouraging. As local authorities in Botswana are in their infant stage, it may be unrealistic to expect high standards of qualifications found elsewhere in well established institutions in other countries, nevertheless the level of their qualifications has a bearing on the existing capacities of local government. One hopes that with passage of time, the calibre, experience and leadership roles of politicians in these organizations will improve.

The other significant aspect having a bearing on smooth functioning of councils and their effectiveness in a multi-party democracy such as Botswana is that of relations between councillors and staff in local government, which at present could be described as far from being ideal. Ideally, the councillors and staff are expected to operate as a team with proper appreciation of each other's role and responsibilities. Often conflicts or tensions arise due to lack of understanding of their own roles as well as of others. Councillors as politicians are essentially policy makers and the staff are concerned with implementation. The staff have to advise the Councillors and execute the decision taken by the Councillors jointly. The Councillors are expected to operate as representatives of the people and articulate their felt needs. They are also expected to exercise general supervision over the implementation of policies by the staff. The staff are expected to inform and advise the Councillors on procedures, regulations and implications of different policies or decisions. The staff are expected to be politically neutral and are expected to serve with loyalty any political party which wins the elections and controls the