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The Basarwa of Botswana

Leadership, Legitimacy and Participation in Development Sites

This article focuses on Basarwa, a marginalized minority ethnic group in Botswana. It shows that the development path taken by Basarwa in Xade is an outcome of struggles between the Basarwa, their representatives, the national government, the representatives of donor organisations as well as the representatives of NGOs that purport to support their cause.

The challenge that contemporary scholars face with respect to explaining the complex notion of development in the context of social groups is to isolate and focus upon the linkages that develop between the interacting individuals or parties concerned. In this context, it becomes wrong to assume that just because a particular person represents a specific group or institution, or belongs to a particular social category, he necessarily acts in the interests or on behalf of these others. In the study of development, especially among the more marginalized, the link between representatives and constituencies, with their differentiated membership, needs to be empirically established, and should not be taken for granted.

This article focuses on Basarwa, a marginalized minority ethnic group in Botswana. Basarwa are also known as bushmen, or, sometimes, the San. The first label is used here since this has become favored by the groups discussed. The area of focus is the Gantsi district where Basarwa, who form 20% of the population of this district, are more concentrated than anywhere else in the country. In particular, focus is on the Basarwa in the settlement of Xade, within the Central Kalahari game reserve (CKGR).

The article shows that the development path taken by Basarwa in Xade is an outcome of struggles between the Basarwa, their representatives, the national government, the representatives of donor organisations as well as the representatives of NGOs that purport to support their cause. What transpires in Xade cannot be explained only by the intervention of public authorities or of powerful outsiders. It is a direct consequence of the interactions, negotiations and social and cognitive struggles that take place among social actors.

At the end of a phase of intervention from different organisations, the Basarwa have experienced some social transformation. Although such transformation re-structures their traditional social organization and conforms it along the lines of the social organization of the dominant non Basarwa groups,

by Isaac Ncube
Mazonde

it remains debatable if Basarwa can be said to have achieved any improvement in the quality of their lives or to have realized development of the kind they want. Apparently, the end result of the intervention by the benefactors has been an exchange, among the Basarwa, of one form of poverty for another.

The Basarwa Question in Botswana

In order to preserve both the Basarwa and the wildlife, the colonial government decided in 1961 to set up the game reserve (CKGR) which measures 561 square kilometers. Basarwa were to remain inside this game reserve and in it 15 boreholes were to be drilled and equipped for their use and also for use by wildlife.

In 1974, the post-colonial government of Botswana established the post of Bushman Development Officer which eventually became the Remote Area Development Programme (RADP) in a bid to accommodate non Basarwa who lived in the remote areas along with Basarwa.

The RADP is funded largely by the Norwegian government through its development agency, NORAD. The main concern of the Norwegians is the welfare of Basarwa. There are also NGOs, both local and foreign, which give various types of assistance to RADs in general and to Basarwa in particular. Yet, the different donor organisations, NGOs and the Botswana government all have a different conceptualization of the

ideal pattern of development for Basarwa.

It may be necessary to begin with the Botswana government's view, since the other benefactors have emerged with the aim of either complementing it in part, or, in some cases, with the aim of opposing it. Broadly, government's policy is to foster the "integration" of Basarwa into the mainstream Tswana communities. Government considers this to be the best way to address the question of marginalization of Basarwa.

Accordingly, the government took two steps with respect to Basarwa who have been living inside the CKGR since 1961. The first step was to group all of them in one settlement called Xade, inside the game reserve, with the aim of improving services. In 1986, government reversed itself in a second step, which was to relocate them outside the game reserve, so that they could have access to land sufficient for them to carry out such development projects as they were capable of implementing.

Politicization of Basarwa

Meanwhile, Basarwa were gaining social and political consciousness, especially between 1961 and 1986, when many of them experienced rapid social change. Much of the enlightenment began as a corollary to the Tribal Land Act. The Tribal Land Act of 1968 gave land rights to members of the different tribes and excluded Basarwa who were not recognized by the Act as

tribesmen. The inequity of the Tribal Land Act was intensified by the implementation of the Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP) seven years later, in 1975. This policy allowed ranches to be demarcated in communal grazing areas in districts with enough land. Basarwa living on such grazing lands were evicted by the ranchers without compensation because, not being members of any tribe, they were regarded as having no rights to the land they had been occupying.

This sparked a land rights movement among Basarwa. Both in communal and commercial areas of Botswana, they protested the treatment they received and took their complaints to district councils and appealed against allocations of land by land boards in their areas. Some of them talked to the media, arguing vociferously that they were not being treated fairly. It was at this time that NGOs, both within Botswana and outside, came into the scene on the side of the Basarwa, who were manifestly being discriminated against by the government and the dominant Tswana groups.

Partly influenced by organisations in Namibia and with the assistance of foreign groups, Basarwa in 1992 established the "First People of the Kalahari." This pressure group promotes the rights of Basarwa, and consists of representatives from the different Basarwa groups within Botswana. The organization met with government in 1993 to outline important issues to their constituents: land rights, political representation in councils, parliament and the house of chiefs, and the right to education in

mother tongue languages for their children. Botswana's official policy is that only Setswana is recognized and used as the vernacular language in schools.

A conspicuous consequence of the association that Basarwa have enjoyed with various organisations and the outside world is the heightening of their understanding of political affairs, manifested clearly in their participation in party politics. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, there had been little evidence of any significant participation of Basarwa in Botswana's politics at national or local levels. There were no Basarwa councilors or members of Parliament, even in the Gantsi district where they are mostly concentrated.

But in 1989, the pattern of the participation of Basarwa in politics changed dramatically in Gantsi district, due to stimulation from the Botswana National Front (BNF), the main opposition political party to the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). Out of 20 candidates, seven Basarwa ran for office of councilor. In two cases, there were Basarwa running against Basarwa. Two were elected. Voter registration increased by 67%, due to high participation by Basarwa. The BNF swept all council seats in Gantsi (7 seats) in Basarwa areas.

CKGR and the Legitimacy of Basarwa Spokesmen

The current government

position is that Basarwa remain within the game reserve to their own detriment - it is in their own interest to move out. In fact, government has another reason for wanting Basarwa to re-locate outside the game reserve. The country wants to make wildlife-based tourism a major industry in the next National Development Plan currently under discussion. In other words, government sees moving Basarwa out of the game reserve as something that will also be for the benefit of the entire nation.

Notwithstanding the advance made by Basarwa in terms of their political participation, and particularly in demanding their rights, there is great difference between the position taken by the majority of Basarwa and that by their spokesmen on the issue of moving out of Xade. Many Basarwa appear to see sense in the position of the government. It is Botswana's policy to give Basarwa cattle to live on, in the way common to many Batswana.

This cannot be done in a game reserve like Xade where cattle are exposed to predators disease carried by game animals. This has been the reason given for the district council's refusal to allocate cattle to Basarwa in Xade. Their desire to get cattle may be one reason why many of them in Xade eventually accepted to move out of the game reserve. The spokesmen, in contrast, are fighting for the right to stay in Xade.

The spokesmen - the leaders of the First People of the Kalahari - were not elected by Basarwa but were brought together by sponsors

for conferences funded by aid agencies, particularly NORAD. The position taken by these agencies and the spokesmen of the Basarwa is that the distinct identity of the Basarwa must be maintained and that remaining in a wildlife area - a classic hunting ground - is their right.

Government is capitalizing on the difference of opinion between the Basarwa and their spokesmen, interpreting it as an indication that the Basarwa spokesmen do not represent the views of Basarwa but of themselves and their sponsors, the foreign NGOs. It argues that Basarwa spokesmen are trying to use the plight of the rest of Basarwa for their own economic advantage. The publicity and economically advantageous foreign trips that the spokesmen enjoy can only last as long as the bulk of Basarwa remain backward and isolated. Hence, continues the government, such spokesmen are bent on doing everything in their power to keep other Basarwa in their current situation of deprivation.

A somewhat complementary view, expressed by others apart from the government, is that in insisting that Basarwa be "preserved" in their pristine form, the sponsors of the Basarwa spokesmen refuse to recognize that most Basarwa have long given up 'pure' hunting-gathering and are guilty of preserving for Basarwa tourists.

Whatever the case, Basarwa have not gained from the discord between the different parties to this development dispute. For the past 13 years, since 1986, they have been waiting for developments

which have not been forthcoming. This is not to suggest that efforts to change the social organization of Basarwa have failed. Over time, and with the encouragement of the government and certain NGOs, Basarwa in Xade have adopted a Tswana type social structure which is centered around a formally appointed chief. It is unclear how becoming more Tswana-like in their social and political organization fits with the claim made by their spokesmen that their separate identity as a "minority people" should be recognized. One major factor catalyzed their becoming more sedentary. In the drought period of the early to mid 1980s, most Basarwa subsisted on maize meal, oil and powdered milk which they obtained from government drought relief programmes. Currently, some 80-90% of Basarwa are estimated to depend on government drought aid mechanisms. Such dependence would throw doubt on assuming that adopting certain Tswana ways, such as chiefship, reflects greater political participation by Basarwa.

Conclusion

The current dependence of Basarwa on government for sustenance is an outcome, and hopefully not a culmination, of a long, complex and on-going process in which different forces oppose each other over certain issues whilst supporting each other over others, with limited gains for each, and no outright winner. The Basarwa, in their attempt to wrest the best from every force, are only able to

transform their social organization in line with the structure of the mainstream Tswana social organization. While this may enhance their ability to organize socially and politically, it still proves insufficient for empowering them economically, at least for the time being.

Unfortunately for the Basarwa, the intervention of the government, ostensibly on their behalf, has turned out to be merely an extension of state control over them, and not a gain in development. Apparently, Basarwa realize this, hence their support for an opposition political party which identifies with their cause. Moreover, Basarwa have continued to suffer economic exploitation through low wages, which at P25 (US\$8) per month, are well below the average monthly rural household income, which was P104 (US\$35) in 1991. Basarwa realize they are now economically bonded to the state, with no tangible development benefits for them. Nor do they always discern much help from their spokesmen, who clearly do not represent the majority Basarwa view. In particular, the role played by the spokesmen facilitates the participation of Basarwa in some instances, while interfering with such participation in other instances. Such is the complexity of "development" at a site. ♀

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Isaac Ncube Mazonde is a senior research fellow in rural development at the National Institute of Development Research and Documentation (NIR) in the University of Botswana. His interests include appropriate technology, social organization for agricultural production, food security and minority groups. He has published in all these fields.

e-mail: mazondei@noka.ub.bw



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 Fall 1996
 96 Mount Auburn Street
 Cambridge, MA 02138
 USA
 e-mail: csinc@cs.org
