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Introduction:

Critical Social Challenges in Contemporary Botswana

T. Maundeni & G. Mookodi

Botswana is one of the fastest developing economies in the world. Economic development has largely been marked by the rapid transformation of the production base from one founded primarily on subsistence agriculture prior to independence to one dependent on the exploitation of minerals since the 1970s. The diamond mining industry has fuelled the rapid growth of employment opportunities in areas such as construction, industry and retail, as well as in the public and parastatal sectors. The transformation of the economy has resulted in a juxtaposition of old and new cultural practices on the one hand, and the replacement of some traditional social relations and practices by new patterns of interaction that are informed by the emergence of Botswana into the global village. The effects of these processes are evident in people's lived experiences and their perceptions of the social challenges facing Botswana.

The theme of this special issue of *Pula* – Critical Social Challenges in Contemporary Botswana – arises from a growing realisation that Botswana's rapid socio-cultural and economic changes have been accompanied, paradoxically in certain cases, by numerous social challenges that confront Botswana on a daily basis. The contributors to this volume explore the challenges of gender inequality, poverty, violence, crime, HIV/AIDS, family instability and special-needs education. While acknowledging the often disruptive impact of change, our contributors go beyond a description of these issues in order to understand the interplay between structure and agency in the manifestation, negotiation and mitigation of social challenges. The articles raise unanswered questions and map the way forward for further research on social issues.

Economic Welfare and Poverty

Over the past few years, policy-makers, academics and civil society in Botswana have been preoccupied by the challenge of poverty. While many Botswana have benefited from the rapid economic development of the past three decades, others still remain trapped in poverty and unemployment. This is due, partly to the decline of the agricultural sector as a primary source of employment and, also to the constraints of a largely undiversified economy that is highly dependent on cattle and diamonds. Osei-Hwedie's article provides an overview of poverty and poverty alleviation in Botswana. He evaluates social policies aimed at poverty reduction, and the achievements to date of Botswana's Vision 2016, which aims to eradicate poverty by the year 2016.

In many African countries, individuals negotiate the challenges posed by limited employment opportunities by setting up income-generating ventures that have come to be collectively described as 'the informal sector'. Recently, the informal sector in Botswana has become more visible as a potential source of employment. However, it is still regarded with a great deal of ambivalence by policy-makers as well as by researchers working within neo-classical social science paradigms. Jimu's article on street vending explores the dynamic relations it occasions

among individuals, communities and governments. He interrogates the notions of 'formal' and 'informal', 'private' and 'public', and shows how these play out in the lived realities of the urban poor. His article challenges policy-makers and researchers to review the situation of street vending in particular, and the 'informal sector' in general, within the context of economic opportunities for the poor.

Gender Discourses, HIV/AIDS and Domestic Violence

An increasing number of women are entering the workforce and contributing to family incomes. As a result there are contestations over power and authority previously held by men. These contestations are evidenced by conflicts within the home as well as in workplaces and the political arena. While much progress has been made in the pursuit of gender equality, the glaring challenges that remain are evidenced by increasing rates of gender-based violence, as well as the continuing subordinate status of women with respect to access and control of resources.

Mookodi and Fuh bring to the fore some of the theoretical and conceptual dilemmas present in gender discourses in Botswana, which utilise the terms 'gender' and 'women' synonymously. Their article argues for more holistic interpretations of gender capable of situating 'women' and 'men' in a relational context regarding social challenges such as gender violence and HIV/AIDS-related issues and in the development of measures to address these problems.

Similarly, Maundeni's article illustrates the limitations of women-focused/male-exclusion analyses of sexual behaviour and the spread of HIV/AIDS in Botswana by highlighting the challenges faced by the boy child in the era of HIV/AIDS. She situates her discussion in the social learning and internalised gender oppression perspectives to illustrate how socialisation practices and idealised notions of 'manhood' predispose young men to unsafe sex practices. Her article advocates not only better education on HIV/AIDS for boys but also a deconstruction of masculinities in order to reflect boys' lived realities.

Mookodi discusses violence against women in Botswana as a growing social challenge. Citing results from national studies on rape and gender violence, she shows that most incidents of violence against women are committed by intimate partners and family members in domestic environments. These acts of violence continue to increase due to the 'privatised' notions of family life and gender divisions of labour that are inherent in patriarchal cultural norms, state ideologies and legal traditions in Botswana.

Family Instability

Studies have shown that families have undergone rapid transformations in the process of change in Botswana. The sources of family stress are manifold, including marital instability and dissolution, poverty and HIV/AIDS. One of the major challenges to many families in Botswana is the separation of family members through personnel transfers. Many of these transfers are done by government in order to provide public services in all parts of the country. Ntseane's article examines the dynamics of transfers in the teaching profession. Her study reveals the strain which transfers place on the teachers themselves, their spouses and their children and argues for the development of transfer policies that take family needs into consideration.

Rapid social and economic change has also limited the ability of families to regulate behaviour. Balogi shows that increasing disparities in family income and rapid social changes have resulted in increasing levels of crime. She argues that the family continues to be regarded by the state and society as the key institution for addressing criminal behaviour, yet, as her discussion illustrates, this attitude stems from an idealisation of the family that reflects neither the diversity of modern family structures nor the capacity of families to cope with deviant members.

Addressing Special Needs

Another important social challenge explored in this special issue concerns society's responsibility towards people with special needs. Many people with special needs are excluded from normal social life, abused, denied their basic human rights and stigmatised both in their families and in their communities. While government has developed programmes to provide education and skills to people with special needs, much remains to be done to empower people with special needs to participate in mainstream society. Hopkins' article reviews the Botswana government's policies and practices on special education since independence and argues that policy initiatives have tended to foster rather than diminish the social exclusion of people with special needs.

Maundeni and Ntseane show that all children in 21st-century Botswana are faced with challenges that impact on their education and overall well-being. Some of these problems stem from family environments and include abuse and violence, HIV/AIDS and poverty. Others are a direct result of societal influences such as peer pressure, substance abuse and sexual harassment. The authors point out that children have a varied ability to cope with psychosocial pressures and argue that professional help needs to be available for those that require it. While acknowledging the existence of counselling teachers in many schools, they show that a lack of appropriate skills and experience limit the effectiveness of these teachers to provide the right interventions in a timely manner. They therefore argue that trained social workers should be available in all Botswana schools.

The articles in this issue therefore address a broad range of important issues in contemporary Botswana society using a variety of social science perspectives and methodologies. However we make no claim to exhaustiveness. The problems explored in these papers are complex and difficult, and there are of course many other important social problems in Botswana besides the ones discussed here. Our intention, and that of our authors, has been to shed light on certain key issues in order to stimulate thinking, provoke discussion and generate more research. We hope that this special issue of *Pula* will help direct the attention of researchers and policy-makers in Botswana to some of the most critical social challenges currently facing the nation and point the way forward towards constructive ways of addressing these challenges.