

Research Note

Understanding the development experiences and aspirations of one Basarwa settlement in Botswana: failed implementation or relentless colonialism?

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This research note gives an overview of the doctoral research I conducted in 2000-01. The study entitled: *Understanding the Development Experiences and Aspirations of One Basarwa Settlement in Botswana: Failed Implementation or Relentless Colonialisms* was conducted among the Basarwa in the Kanaku settlement in the Southern Administrative District of Botswana (Mabutsane-subdistrict).

My motivation to conduct this study has stemmed from my own professional experience. As a lecturer in the Department of Social Work, and a member then of the Basarwa Research Committee (BRC) and a human rights activist, I became aware of the injustices experienced by the Basarwa in Botswana in the name of "development". A number of concerns about the situation of the Basarwa, relating to the context, process and application of development policies and programmes, were raised both locally and internationally with regularity. Engaging in these forums and participating in research activities, seminars and conferences supported by the BRC changed me in a fundamental way. The experience has taught me that the current environment in which the Basarwa are stigmatized, disempowered and held with contempt by the dominant Tswana groups and the government offers them little hope to realize their aspirations for development programmes. So, I became interested in the processes that contribute to the continued marginalisation of the Basarwa and the search for answers, hence the conceptualization of this research.

The research examined the situation of indigenous peoples in a global context and linked it to the situation of the Basarwa in Botswana and the various development approaches and strategies undertaken to address the situation. Specifically, the study explored how Basarwa resident in the Kanaku settlement understand development, as a result of their experiences with the Remote Area Development Programme (RADP), and what their aspirations are for appropriate development programmes. The study highlighted both the immediate and underlying problems responsible for continued failure in the implementation of the RADP projects in Kanaku. Using a theoretical-historical perspective of multiple colonization as a framework, I examined how the process of "development" has been and continues to be

used as a tool of colonization by dominant groups in society. I argue that the outcomes of development have been detrimental to the lives of the Basarwa and have functioned primarily as tools of colonization. The research calls for alternative development strategies to address the situation of the Basarwa in Botswana.

Rationale and linkages to the Basarwa context

In Botswana, and indeed globally, there is a growing concern about the decline in the quality of life for indigenous peoples (Burger 1990; Good 1993; Hitchcock and Holm 1993; Nthomang 1999, 2002; Saugestad 2001) in spite of continued efforts to assist in improving their socio-economic, political and general quality of life. Thus despite Botswana's remarkable economic growth since the early 1980s and its ability to invest extensively in the social sector and increase access to social services, the Basarwa living in remote areas are generally excluded from the fruits of social development enjoyed by mainstream population groups in Botswana (Kann et al. 1990; CMI 1997). The experiences of the past three decades in Botswana have shown that past and current government development policies and programmes have been unable to mitigate poverty, deprivation and marginalisation of the Basarwa. What makes the situation worse is the fact that, over the years there has never been any coordinated attempt to engage in critical analysis about why quality of life for the Basarwa has not improved, despite various development intervention efforts. There is also a tendency by government officials to blame the Basarwa for policy and programme failures rather than to engage in a mutual examination of the approach, practice and implementation of development policies and programmes in the Basarwa context. Little has been done to determine the reasons for such failures, with a view to developing effective development interventions. It is pertinent then to ask: (i) why have development interventions not worked for the Basarwa? And (ii) what are the possible strategies to tackle their situation?

A number of well-established scholars, practitioners, researchers and activists have set out to examine these questions (Hitchcock 1996; Le Roux 1996; Mazonde 2002 a, b; Mogwe 1992; Saugestad 2001). Their efforts have highlighted the need to reassess current development approaches. The limitations of past and current approaches and strategies are increasingly being recognized. While the objectives of the previous and present development approaches remain of critical importance, there is an urgent need to determine effective ways to improve the current situation of the Basarwa. Previous research has provided only partial and incomplete answers to the above questions, due to three main reasons:

- (1) Basarwa knowledge and understanding of their own situation has largely been ignored by mainstream development discourses. Most empirical research has relied on knowledge as defined by these dominant discourses, which are deemed objective and verifiable. Thus, other forms of knowledge have been disregarded.
- (2) Methodological limitations in earlier research have potentially undermined Basarwa definition, understandings, experiences, as well as their aspirations for appropriate development programmes.
- (3) Practical limitations have led to a gap between policy objectives and the translation of objectives into action. There is essentially, a lack of political commitment to the realization of policy objectives.

These research deficits provided motivation for the present research, which aimed to (i) generating a theoretical/knowledge base; (ii) improving policy outcomes and (iii) empowering Kanaku residents. It has addressed some of the conceptual, methodological and practical limitations of previous research and, in this way, offers a comprehensive picture of the Basarwa situation and their visions for appropriate development programmes.

Methodology

In order to examine the Basarwa's experiences within the RADP and their aspirations for development, a qualitative, multi-method research design was used. Ninety-seven Basarwa resident in the Kanaku settlement participated (directly or indirectly) in the three stages of data collection. The data collection involved four techniques: focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, informal conversations and field observations. Focus group discussion, complemented by in-depth interviewing, was the primary data collection for this research. The methodology was founded on the notion that the Basarwa have a unique knowledge base derived from their personal experiences, understandings and aspirations. Thus the Basarwa understand their problems well and are probably best suited to guide and provide solutions for themselves.

Findings

The findings of the study have highlighted and confirmed many of the concerns raised in the literature on the Basarwa in Botswana (see, for example, Good 1993; Hitchcock 1980; Wilmsen 1989; Wily 1982) in relation to the colonial nature of the development processes. In particular the findings confirmed assumptions underlying this study that government development policies and programmes implemented under the auspices of the RADP in Kanaku function primarily as vehicles of colonization. The analysis based on people's voices and my observations demonstrate the colonial nature of the development programmes, including but not limited to, the tendency to ignore the perspectives and voices of the people and to impose decisions from the top. This has often resulted in people playing the role of spectators in their own development. It is for this reason that people often become totally dependent on the government for development.

The findings of this research also highlight two issues which should be of interest and concern to policy-makers and implementers: first, the issues concerning the Basarwas' experiences with the RADP and, second, the Basarwa's aspirations for appropriate development programmes. The research demonstrated that, if these issues and aspirations are ignored and orthodox models of development perpetuated, development initiatives in the Basarwa communities are in danger of continuing to be unresponsive and irrelevant to their situation.

In this research, it has been shown repeatedly that the RADP is unresponsive to the needs, problems and aspirations of the Basarwa. For example, despite its introduction in the early 1970s, the Basarwa of Kanaku and similar settlements have continued to experience profound exploitation, subjugation, poverty and marginalisation. The realities of daily life for the Basarwa include: lack of basic life necessities (such as food, clothing, shelter, paid jobs), negative attitudes underlying provision, access to and utilization of services provided; dependency on government welfare programmes (mainly food handouts); top-down approaches to local development; lack of consultation; that is, ignoring the voices of the Basarwa and, denying them the right to be heard; lack of respect and recognition of them as equal partners in the development processes; denial of the right to participate in local development processes; subordination of the Basarwa's interests to those of the dominant Tswana-speaking groups and negative attitudes of service providers towards the Basarwa.

However, and despite the above problems, the findings of this research are that the Basarwa in Kanaku settlement have developed certain aspirations for appropriate development programmes. These aspirations include: consultation; importance of the *kgotla*; respect and dignity; recognition as equal partners in the development process; relevant education, skills and training for capacity building; freedom from *Bagkhweni*

(Tswana-speaking dominant groups); economic independence and ownership of economic resources; self-employment and political representation.

The overall finding of this research is that, despite many decades of development programming, the RADP has not improved the Basarwa quality of life, but instead has served to perpetuate existing problems, thus reinforcing the perception that government development programmes function primarily as vehicles of colonization.

A Basarwa-centred development paradigm: the future

Throughout the research, two things have become clear: the appalling situation and underdevelopment of the Basarwa communities, and the need for and potential of a Basarwa-centred development paradigm. Clearly, efforts to improve quality of life for the Basarwa by the RADP have not succeeded but instead continue to deteriorate. Two questions arise:

- (i) How and in what ways can a Basarwa-centred development paradigm be employed in Botswana to deal effectively with the problems facing the Basarwa communities?
- (ii) What is the appropriate role of a Basarwa-centred development paradigm, given the level of marginalisation and underdevelopment of the Basarwa communities?

To answer these questions at a practical level requires the creation of a new order, new culture and new politics. I suggest that to address the dysfunctional consequences of failure in the implementation of the RADP will require structural changes, in particular the development of new institutions for Basarwa governance. It will also require the reform and in some cases an overhaul of the existing institutional arrangements for dealing with the resources provided through the RADP. Genuine partnerships between the government and these Basarwa institutions must replace the current mechanisms, which are controlled by the government.

Of Basarwa problems, it is important that efforts to address their situation adopt a long-term view. Short-term quick fix solutions must be avoided because they have hitherto failed to produce positive results. A Basarwa-centred development paradigm appears to be more appealing than conventional approaches currently practiced by the RADP. It may provide a platform to engage the government, non-governmental organisations, community-based organizations, the Basarwa and other stakeholders in dialogue, in order to find appropriate ways to address the situation facing the Basarwa. It is hoped that this approach will contribute to the development of innovative strategies that will respond effectively to the problems posed by 'relentless colonialisms'.

The goal of this research in both the short and long-term is to work closely with all stakeholders to promote research with, and not only for, the Basarwa. To achieve this aim, I endeavor to engage Kanaku residents in community-based action research to enable them to get together to clarify and further reflect on their experiences, to identify key features of their problems and to share their stories with others for continued action (see, for example, Stringer 1996, 1999). This approach may create possibilities to engage with and prepare both the Basarwa and the government to develop and adopt meaningful and appropriate policies and programmes within which the experiences of the Basarwa and their aspirations for development can be pursued, so as to increase the likelihood of achieving the ultimate aim of development—improving their quality of life.

Conclusion

In this research I conclude that, despite decades of development programming, the quality of life for the Basarwa has not improved, instead it has deteriorated. The findings of this

research indicate that, underlying the rhetoric of the Basarwa development, there are processes suggesting that development in the Basarwa communities has been organized in ways that serve the interests of dominant Tswana groups and government, and thus primarily function as vehicles of colonization. It is therefore essential to engage in an in-depth analysis of the effects of colonization on the Basarwa, in order to unravel the often-unquestioned institutional assumptions that construct, entrench and perpetuate the marginalisation of the Basarwa in Botswana. Once these assumptions are understood, it may be possible to move towards the development of appropriate solutions, based on the principles embodied in Basarwa understandings, experiences and aspirations for development programmes. In these ways, we will have the opportunity to create and enhance the quality of life for the Basarwa. Failure to do so will amount to further relentless colonialism.

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