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Governance and elections: enhancing local democracy in Botswana

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Abstract

This article discusses the extent to which local government is an institution of choice and voice. It argues that although the Botswana Local government system operates within the multi-party framework, it has severe constraints that limit its effectiveness. One of the major constraints which has been the subject of many government and scholarly documents is the low caliber of local leadership (councillors) as well as the under representation of certain groups in the political system such as women. These issues are highlighted in the paper including some innovations, which may be applied to further strengthen local democracy. The paper begins by examining the conceptual framework within which local democracy operates in Botswana. It then goes into describing that process including some shortcomings. Finally, the paper concludes by advocating some innovations to improve the system.

Introduction

The objectives of local government are diverse and differ from country to country and from one period to the other within a particular country. Local government as an institution is expected to provide a choice and act as a voice to express the needs and aspirations of the people. Ideally, this is what often justifies local elections. The question of whether citizens should have an equal right to vote in deciding the composition of their governments is no longer debatable. What is debatable is how best to afford people the opportunity to participate in the running of their own affairs. The future of local government is therefore dependent upon the strength of local democracy.

Local government is based on representative democracy where local councils are constituted by local elections of councillors as representatives of local people. Representative democracy is inevitable in a complex and large-scale society. It is no longer practicable to practice direct democracy where all citizens are involved in decision-making. In order to strengthen local government it is necessary to strengthen representative democracy.

It is indisputable that compared to other African countries, Botswana's local government system has been successful. It is one of the longest stable multi-party systems, which is anchored on regular election after every five years. This year, 1999, the country had the sixth general elections since independence in 1966. The 1999 elections were important in many respects. A number of constitutional changes have been introduced.

For the first time, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) which was established in 1998 conducted the elections (see Molomo on the performance of the IEC in another article in this volume). The voting age was reduced from 21 years to 18. Also, the system of voting has changed. This time a ballot paper listing all political parties and symbols was used in place of a disk. Despite all these changes, a critical look at the operation of the system suggests that all is not well with representative democracy in local government. Although many attempts have been made at public participation, these have often been frustrated among other reasons by public apathy. These and other decentralization issues are examined in this paper, and it advocates new strategies to improve the system.

The Rationale for Decentralisation

The Conceptual Framework: On attaining independence, many African countries, including Botswana, were pre-occupied with building a nation-state. That in turn had a centralising effect and negative impact on the delivery of public services. It was believed

that a strong central government was essential to national unity and modernisation of African societies. Many African leaders at the time, such as Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenyatta of Kenya, Nkrumah of Ghana to name a few, were committed to a statist approach to development. This strategy however failed to bear fruits. The movement towards decentralisation is an attempt to improve the delivery of public services in a cost-efficient manner and increase the productivity of the public sector (Hope, 1997)

Decentralisation is a concept, which has acquired many meanings overtime. Many people use it to mean different things. Rondinelli, Nellis and Cheema (1983) define it as the transfer of authority or responsibility for decision-making, planning, management, or resource allocation from the central government to its field units. These are district administrative units, local governments, regional or functional authorities, semi-autonomous public authorities, parastatal organisations, private entities, and nongovernmental private or voluntary organisations.

In its strictly political sense, decentralisation refers to the transfer of powers and responsibilities to elected local governments, who exercise a significant measure of local autonomy. The main emphasis in this definition is responsiveness and accountability. In this sense decentralised governments are closer to the people as consumers of services. They are therefore better able to make choices that reflect the needs and priorities of the people. It is also easier and convenient to hold locally elected representatives and officials accountable than those at the centre.

Some scholars, however, for example Curtis (1991) argues that decentralisation to local government may not go far enough. That is, local government may be too large or bureaucratic and as such not be responsive to the needs and aspirations of their communities. In this case decentralisation beyond local government is necessary and it may be to non-governmental organisations and community based organisations. A properly decentralised form of government would display the following characteristics:

- The local authority should be institutionally separate from the centre and assume responsibility for a significant range of local services such as primary education, primary health, and community development and secondary roads.
- The local authority should also be in a position to employ their own qualified personnel, who sometimes may be temporarily seconded from the civil service, especially when local government is still in its infant stages.
- Local authorities should have their own funds and budgets, which are totally separate from the central government. They should also be in a position to raise a substantial part of their revenue through direct local taxation.
- The decentralised government would be governed internally by the councils. These are composed of popularly elected representatives from amongst the population.
- Government administrators would then withdraw from an executive to an advisory role and let local government carry on with their business (Mawhood & Davey, 1980:405).

This is regarded as the classical form of a decentralised government, but as mentioned earlier, the concept has captured many other forms, which are not really regarded as decentralised governments. The use of the term in this article has in mind the above mentioned characteristics although there are limitations.

The primary objectives of decentralisation are to promote citizen participation in the political process. Thus, decentralisation through localities constitutes training ground for democracy. It is further maintained that the only path to genuine development is through the ability of people to be self-governing. Development can not take place because people receive orders from above, they have to understand and feel they are a part of the development process. This also empowers citizens through their enhanced participation in decision-making and development planning (Silverman, 1992). Another objective of decentralisation is that it assists in promoting governmental accountability especially where institutions which are supposed to enforce accountable governance are either non-

existent or where they exist are seriously weakened. Conducting periodic elections is not a sufficient indicator of accountability (Matlosa, 1997). Several reasons are at play here. There is rampant apathy and there is also a tendency for national issues to dominate and overshadow local elections. It is also through decentralisation that people are able to practice self-help and produce goods and services for themselves rather than depend on the centre (dependency syndrome). The combination of participation and accountability of the leaders will lead to a responsive administration at the local level, in other words, this would enhance better governance.

It is also argued that because the demand for some services may vary from one community to the other, the decentralised provision of such services will be able to adjust to these differential demand patterns. This would improve economic and managerial efficiency because of close proximity between the producer, consumer and the critical information required (Smith, 1985). It is in this respect that a decentralised government is regarded as having better knowledge of local preferences because of access to information which may be denied central government (Creme, Estache & Seabright, 1994). Other terms have been used to describe the same phenomenon. In this article, however, the term decentralisation will be used interchangeably with devolution. This means the term is used in its political sense and it excludes other forms such as deconcentration, delegation and privatisation. It will only suffice here to briefly define these terms.

Deconcentration is the passing down of selective administrative functions to lower levels or sub-national units within central government ministries. Deconcentration is the least extensive form of decentralisation. Although it does result in some dispersal of power, few decisions can be taken without reference to the centre.

Delegation is the transfer of specific authority and decision-making powers to organizations that are outside the regular bureaucratic structure and that are only indirectly controlled by the central government, such as parastatals and semiautonomous agencies. In this type of arrangement the central government retains the right to overturn local decisions and can, at any time, take these powers back.

Privatization refers to the transfer of control and responsibility for government functions and services to the private sector - private voluntary organizations or private enterprises. From a broader perspective, privatization encompasses a wide range of policies to encourage private sector participation in public service provision and that eliminates or modifies the monopoly status of public enterprises.

The Process of Decentralisation in Botswana

Botswana adopted a liberal democratic system of government since independence in 1966. Since that time decentralisation has been an officially declared policy. The Government White Paper no 21/1964 stated:

It is essential that constitutional development at the Centre should be balanced by the growth of democratic institutions throughout the country. Freedom and responsibility in thought and action must be stimulated at every level if they are to be fully understood and given effective expression. One of the best checks to any tendency to authoritarianism is a widespread cultivation of these habits of mind and the readiness of people at every level of society to play part in the conduct of local affairs.

These policies have been supported by successive development plans including the current NDP 8. Decentralisation in Botswana has been the subject of substantial governmental review and some academic review also. More than two decades ago Tordoff (1974) noted that:

The growth of strong district councils is being encouraged [by the Botswana government] and it is intended that they will increasingly become the focal point...responsible for promoting the general well-being and economic development...

The government of Botswana has been consistent in its support for decentralisation. To that end, donor assistance, particularly through the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), has also been provided since 1979 with the following objectives:

- To promote further decentralisation of responsibilities from central to local government, and in particular, to the District Councils;
- To contribute to a more even distribution of economic and social resources among the people; and
- To facilitate and enhance the implementation capacity of the District Councils and other local authorities at district level with regard to the provision of services and the execution of development projects (SIDA, 1993).

It was however realised that decentralisation in earnest would not start if local authorities lack skilled and trained human resources to execute their plans. That gap led to the preparation of a Policy Paper and Action Plan on decentralisation by the then Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing in October 1993.

The Structure of Local Councils

Reference to local authorities in Botswana is usually understood in the context of four major institutions of devolution and deconcentration; namely District and Town/City councils, Land Boards, Tribal Administration and District Administration. Consistent with the definition of a decentralised government given above the discussion will refer mainly to District/Town/City councils in general.

At present there exist two City Councils (Gaborone and Francistown), three Town Councils, one Township Authority and nine District Councils, twelve Land Boards, and twelve Tribal Administrations. In addition, there are twelve District Administrations. All local authorities in Botswana exist by virtue of ordinary Acts of Parliament and, at least in theory, any of them could be abolished at any time by Parliament. Local authorities are not included in the Constitution and, consequently, they have no inherent competence derived from the Constitution. That makes Botswana a unitary state with Parliament having sovereign power with full competence in all areas of jurisdiction (du Toit, 1995). Legislative authority is vested in Parliament, which consists of the National Assembly, the House of Chiefs, and the President. Local government evolved out tribal administration, which performed limited government functions before independence. The tribal Chief allocated land, raised revenue, held court, hired the teachers, ran the schools, and repaired roads in his area (Egner, 1978).

District Councils were established in Botswana through the Local Government (District Councils) Act of 1965. Parallel legislation, the Townships Act of 1965, created urban councils. District Councils are responsible for five major functions. These are related to the provision of primary education, primary health care, rural village water supply, social and community development, and construction and maintenance of tertiary roads. Councils are in-charge of overall district development, initiating and implementing programmes of local infrastructure and services, preparing of district development plans and budgets and co-ordinating activities of some ministries at the local level. In addition, there are some other permitted functions that Councils can undertake if they have the resources. They include, for example, development of markets, administration of stray cattle, provision of streetlights, and the building of recreational facilities. They have both legislative and executive authority.

Elections, Local Government and the Public

The purpose and significance of elections is understood to give citizens an opportunity to elect a government of their choice. This means that local councillors are held accountable to the public through local elections. Thus, the centrepiece of Botswana's democracy rests particularly with councillors as elected representatives. The composition of every district

or town/city council and the manner in which members are elected are contained in the order establishing it. The Act stipulates that:

A person shall be qualified to become a member of a Council if he is qualified in terms of section 15, to vote in any election for member of the council and does not possess the disqualification for membership of the National Assembly referred to in section 62 of the constitution" (Section 7(1) of the Local Government Act).

Politics and Local Democracy

For purposes of electing councillors, council elections in Botswana are held simultaneously with parliamentary elections. In practise local politics tend to be dominated by national politics. This is shown by the fact that during campaigns, most would be members of Parliament almost invariably become guest speakers at political rallies. It is therefore not easy to determine exactly what considerations local people take into account when voting a particular party into council. This makes it even more difficult to interpret the results of the elections, as tactical voting is not yet well developed in Botswana.

The results of the local government elections can also be influenced by the system used. Under the present system councillors are elected for five-year terms and they can retire or stand for re-election. Although the system gives the electorate a choice to decide who shall govern them, they have very little to do about a particular councillor in between elections.

Council elections are conducted along party lines with a single-member system of representation of wards. The winner requires only a simple plurality of the vote's cast in order to be returned for a five-year term. The 40 constituencies in Botswana are divided into wards for purposes of council elections and representation. In the 1999 elections there were 11 independent candidates in total from the following constituencies, Tswapong North-1, North-East-1, Moshupa-8 and Barolong-1. Generally, 5 council seats were contested and this means a councillor represents about over 3000 people in a ward.

Political parties perform a significant role in society. The most important function they perform across the board is providing a link between the rulers and the ruled, interest group aggregation, setting and implementing collective goals for society, acting as agents of elite recruitment and socialisation (Hague, R & Harrop, M; 1987: Ball, A 1988). As discussed in Mokopagosi and Molomo in this issue, political parties are essential ingredients of a functioning liberal democracy. They fight for political power within the rules laid down in the political system in order to mobilise support of the electorates either by propaganda, organised activities or by emphasising ideological outlook with other parties (Ball, 1988). Political parties, however, seek to realise their objectives through the attainment of government itself. There are however two opposing views about the role of political parties in local government. One view supports their role while the other deplores them.

Those who advocate the active participation of political parties in local government argue that politics is concerned with the authoritative decisions of distributing resources in society. This therefore permeates through all strata of society. It is further argued that party politics educate people about the work of local government. Divisions and conflicts, which are sometimes prevalent in council help, increase the interest of people in the work of local councils. If party politics were excluded from local government, this would increase political apathy. The number of uncontested seats often reflects this. It is also felt that a council composed of party politicians is kept on its toes by an opposition that wants to take over and establish an efficient administration.

Party organisation in local government help to give greater definition and vitality to the conduct of local matters. Political parties are able to give an organised opinion. Jackson reminds us that:

A proposal supported or opposed on party lines, gets a better and more zealous exposition and advocacy, and a more comprehensive discussion than otherwise might be the case (Jackson, 1976:118).

Debates in council cannot be expected to be straightforward where discussion are simply followed by a vote. Though the majority party in council will in many cases win in terms of the vote, their decisions can sometimes be questioned in council to the extent of referring some of them to committees for reconsideration. Such a move may not necessarily change the earlier decision if the party still wants to pursue such a course of action, but it serves a purpose. Wiseman reminds us that:

Debates are to educate public opinion and to enable parties to express their views and stake a claim for future support from the electorate. This argument may even be more valid in local government because the vast majority of decisions are on detailed administrative matters, which a large meeting is incompetent to decide. At most it is competent to refer the matter back to the appropriate committee for further consideration (Jackson, 1976).

Lastly, it is believed that caucus meetings are important, and do not render councillors impotent. Such meetings provide them with the opportunity to air their views without any fear or misquotation from the press or council officers. They also have an opportunity to ventilate their constituency grievances and make their leaders aware of their ward's problems.

The opposing view of political parties in local government departs from the premise that the activities of local government are basically concerned with administrative issues and therefore are not necessarily political in nature. The emphasis should be in improving efficiency in providing services rather than decision-making in council being based on political expediency as judged by the political party.

Second, the existence of party groups suppresses free discussion and renders council debates meaningless since party groups at caucus meetings take real decisions. Thirdly, party politics in local government is seen as an assault against democracy since candidates are recruited through party organisation which only gives choice to a few individuals (Kingdom, 1991). This system prevents the right people from putting their names forward to stand for elections. Thus, the selection of candidates is based on party loyalty and service. Lastly, political parties promote conflict with the local community and this is harmful.

There is therefore a firm party allegiance of voters and there is very little electoral success for independent candidates. The Botswana 1999 general elections have just confirmed that political parties and not individuals¹⁶ (as independents) are indispensable institutions in a modern democracy. Although political parties may have social and political effects on individuals, they are here to stay.

The Act establishing a council gives the Minister responsible for Local Government certain powers. The Minister has general powers to suspend a councillor and to declare his/her seat vacant. This power is in addition to other grounds on which a councillor may lose his/her seat in the council. These include insolvency; a prison sentence; ceasing to reside in the council area; and absence from three consecutive meetings of council without the permission of the chairperson. The Act also gives the Minister of Local Government the power to nominate additional councillors. The original intention of this provision was to bring people of substance to councils and also to cater for under-represented groups such as minorities and women. Following the 1999 elections, out of the 69 specially nominated councillors, 36 are women. Although an attempt was made not to upset the balance of between political parties represented in those councils, this provision has been used by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) to upset the balance of power where it had lost control of the council.

This issue was taken up by an All Party Conference held in Francistown where most opposition parties were against such nomination. The main criticism was that the BDP abused the system by bringing in people who had been rejected by the electorates.

This plea from opposition parties has been ignored by the BDP as the Minister of Local Government has nominated some people who had been defeated in the elections. Constituencies where this has happened include Gaborone, Kanye, Okavango and Ngwaketse South. Some of the nominated councillors lost in the parliamentary elections. The BDP has been scoring convincing victories over other political parties at council level.

As Table 1 shows in the 1984 elections, the BDP won 195 of the 254 council seats, BNF got 36, BPP 18 and BIP won only 3 seats. Opposition parties subsequently made significant gains in the urban areas. The opposition Botswana National Front in the 1989 elections won the Gaborone City and Jwaneng councils. The North-East District was the only rural council, which was controlled by the opposition Botswana Peoples Party following the 1989 elections. Political parties, both ruling and opposition have recently been riddled with factional fighting. These centred on jostling for positions of power as well as personality clashes. Such differences affected the performance as well as the outcome of the elections. It is however, interesting to note that both the BDP and the BNF made significant gains in local elections in 1994. BDP won 243 seats whilst BNF won 130 seats. Thus the BNF controlled Selebi-Phikwe, Lobatse, Jwaneng, Gaborone urban councils as well as Kgatleng district council. However, the two main political parties (BDP and BNF) entered the 1999 elections at the height of their factional fighting-though BDP managed the infighting (see Molomo and Mokopakgosi in this volume). The BNF ended being the main loser at the local government level as they lost the control of some of the councils even before the elections in 1998 due to the split and formation of the Botswana Congress Party (BCP).

About 68 councillors elected in 1994 under the ticket of the BNF defected to the BCP, hence some councils such as Gaborone city council, Selebi-Phikwe and Kgatleng district council changed political leadership just before the elections (*Mmegi*, 1998). The split in the BNF paid dividends to the BDP in the 1999 elections as the party claimed control of the Selebi-Phikwe town council and the Kgatleng district council. The BNF retained control of Lobatse, Jwaneng town councils and reclaimed the Gaborone city council from the BCP. As Table 1 indicates BDP won 302 seats, BNF 80 seats, BCP 13 and BAM won only 9 council seats. The message, as Molomo and Mokopakgosi indicate in their article in this volume, is that Botswana is essentially a two party system. The 1999 election results demonstrate that voters preferred to choose between the BDP and BNF.

Table 2 shows the political party control of councils following the 1999 elections. As already mentioned, the BDP registered an overwhelming majority both nationally and locally, with the opposition Botswana National Front controlling only three urban councils. There are a number of challenges facing the country and most of the political parties have taken them on board as key issues in elections. Amongst the major issues are unemployment, poverty and HIV/AIDS and gender. These are also issues of national concern and therefore there is no significant qualitative difference between national and local issues save the decision as to whether there is a need for a standpipe or the location of a clinic in a particular locality.

Table 1: No of Seats Won by Political Parties in Local Government: 1974-1999

Year	BDP	BPP	BIP	BNF	BPU
1974	149	11	4	11	-
1979	147	12	3	14	-
1984	195	18	3	36	-
1989	110	12	3	20	0
1994	243	15	9(IFP) ¹⁷	30	4
1999	302	9(BAM) ⁸	-	80	0

Source: Compiled from previous reports on general Elections as well as preliminary report from Chairperson of IEC for 1999 elections.

Table 2: Political Party Control of Councils in 1999/2004

Council	Party in Power	Elected	Nominated	Total no of Councillors
North-West	BDP	40	6	46
Sowa	-	-	6	6
Central	BDP	107	15	122
North East	BDP	17	3	20
Francistown	BDP	16	2	18
Ghanzi	BDP	18	3	21
S/Phikwe	BDP	13	2	15
Kweneng	BDP	50	8	58
Kgalagadi	BDP	23	3	26
Kgatleng	BDP	21	3	24
Southern	BDP	44	8	52
Jwaneng	BNF	7	1	8
Gaborone	BNF	25	4	29
Lobatse	BNF	11	2	13
South-East	BDP	18	3	21
Total		407	69	476

Quality of Local Democracy

Local councils are no doubt important institutions in the system of democratic governance in Botswana. However, for the last three decades, many questions have been raised regarding the legitimacy, power and effectiveness of these institutions. Apart from being weak financially, the quality of their leadership lacked ability and foresight to anchor them properly as people's institutions. The challenge facing Botswana like many others in the 21st century, is the creation of strong, effective and less dependent locally oriented councils. It is these councils which are strategically placed at the local level than any other agency to perform this role.

For this to happen, council leadership needs to improve their governance skills. The leadership that is required includes knowledge of the country's system of governance, national and international trends-that is opportunities and threats, as well as the needs of a population which is growing in sophistication.

The Challenge of the councillor in the 21st century in Botswana will have to operate under completely changed circumstances. Their primary functions have been to provide services such as health, education and others. There was less expectation for them to create employment and attract investment to their areas. Through the financial support by the central government councils have been able to provide schools, clinics, roads and water points. Statistics indicate that over 80% of school going children have access to primary education, some 85% of the population are within the internationally defined 15km walking distance to the nearest health facility and some 90% of the population have access to safe drinking water (Population Census, 1991).

It is generally agreed that for councils to be effective instruments of local democracy, the quality of those who become councillors is crucial. To date, the quality of elected and some nominated councillors has been low and it attracted a major criticism (Egner, 1987). A study conducted by the Democracy Research Project of the University of Botswana on the educational level of councillors in 1992 came up with worrisome findings. This study which was conducted on the eve of the 1994 general elections, showed that out of 104 councillors interviewed (about a third of the councillors at the time) some 88.5% of them had only a Junior certificate or below. Some 65% had standard seven or less. In comparison to the their employers, the same study showed that about 65% of council staff held post O' level qualifications. The discrepancy in the level of educational attainment may lead to a weak local democracy and a powerful and dominant local bureaucracy.

The functions performed by councils mentioned earlier in the paper are to be provided to the public by councillors as legitimate decision-makers at the local level. This they do

of course together with local government officers. This implies that the centrepiece of Botswana's democracy rest particularly with councillors. Councillors therefore as elected representatives have significant roles to perform. Some of these important roles follow. Councillors have to balance the different interests of stakeholders (Macarthur, 1997). This means councillors have to see their roles as managing the relationships of all those who would like to have an influence on council policies. Such relations include central government, non-governmental organisations, the civil service, political parties including the party which the councillor belongs, opposition parties, different interest groups and the people at large-including those who can not vote and those who probably did not vote for the councillor.

Councillors are also expected to provide leadership skills. This includes many aspects such as the ability to mobilise and educate the constituents, the ability to manage relations with council staff, showing effective representation skills by reflecting the interests of constituents within the council and of the council to other stakeholders. Their roles also expect them to perform tasks, which include technical skills. They are involved in planning and implementation, strategic analysis, setting and giving overall guidance to the policies of the authority as a whole taking into account the party manifesto. Financial management of the council includes setting budgets and monitoring expenditure. Setting, monitoring and evaluating development projects at the local level. The roles just mentioned clearly indicate that the role requirements of councillors are becoming more complex and increasingly so. But there seems to be no set criteria in terms of the type of the skills, qualification and experience of the person required to become a councillor. The only acceptable qualification at present is for one to be a member of a political party.

Gendering Local Democracy

Gender is one of the variables, which clearly affect the representative nature of local democracy. Women in Botswana as in other countries in the region are underrepresented in decision-making structures of the state. As representatives, women therefore face an additional burden in performing their role in a male dominated society (Selolwane, 1997; Molutsi, 1998). For a long time women were made to believe that leadership positions in society whether in the family, community and even international organisations were reserved for their male counterparts.

Many reasons were advanced in explaining the absence of women in decision-making structures. Some of the constraints included pressures from the family, the party and society, lack of economic resources, lack of time due to multiple roles performed by women as wives, mothers and caretakers in the family. Women also used their vote to validate such conceptions. They were reluctant to vote for a woman, as they have no confidence in other women as leaders.

Paradoxically, women accounted for the majority of voters in Botswana, but they elected men into political office. Women also played a major role in political organization and mobilization at grassroots level, but had little or no representation in the upper decision-making structures of their political parties. Thus, women have been their own enemies. This attitude led to women not playing a positive role in local democracy. The low numbers of women in councils reflects this. Only 70 women were councillors following the 1994 elections. The following table below shows representation of women by party. There have however been positive developments following the education project by Emang Basadi where political parties have specifically committed themselves to gender awareness and some parties committed themselves to supporting women candidates.⁹

In the 1999 elections over 200 women contested local government elections. Table 3 overleaf shows the number of women who contested elections by party.

Table 3: No of women who contested the 1999 elections by Party

<i>Party</i>	<i>Number of women candidates</i>
BAM	19
BCP	36
BDP	136
MELS	3
BNF	9

Source: Compiled by Emang Basadi Women's Association. This may not be a complete list.

Almost all-political parties, which contested the 1999 elections, supported women candidates. The table below shows the number of women who won council seats by party in the 1994 elections. As the figure show, BDP had the majority of women councillors.

Table 4: Number of female councillors by party following 1994 elections

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>Number of women councillors</i>
BDP	55
BNF	10
BPP	3
IFP	1
Non aligned	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>70</i>

The Way Forward

The ushering in of the new millennium requires political structures, which will help councils to engage with their local communities more effectively. But structures alone will not bring local democracy which is necessary if councils are to be confident in what they are doing. That will only come about if there is higher participation in elections and close and regular contact between a council and the community between elections.

Councils are created to promote democracy and transparency in decision-making at the local level. The main issue is, do people feel councils belong to them after 33 years of independence? To what extent do people participate in decisions about the location of certain facilities such as schools, church and clinics? Do they know what their councillors are supposed to do and how much do they earn in terms of salaries and allowances? These are pertinent questions and need to be addressed. It is believed that not all the answers to these questions will be in the affirmative. That then would imply councils have failed to promote local democracy. Local democracy therefore remains deficient without a clear and close relationship between councillors and their communities. Councils must realise that in their communities they have resources. They have social capital in terms of skills, organisations, institutions, experience, culture and history that need to be mobilised for development. All those involved need to develop their skills and require the right facilities and support to be able to operate fully and effectively. There is also a need to develop and adopt effective tools for engaging with local people. The development strategy for the millennium is partnership. Councils cannot go it alone. It is important to bring the private sector and civil society as partners in development, which will contribute, to good governance.

The Duty to Consult

Although all councillors are expected to consult with their communities' every-time they go for council meetings to seek views of the people and also give feedback, many simply do not do it. At present communities have no redress mechanisms if a particular councillors does not consult with them regularly, except at the time of elections after 5 years. It is necessary therefore for consultation and participation to be embedded into the culture of all councils. The government should consider making it a statutory duty on councils to consult and engage in dialogue with their communities. The discretion should however be left to the councils to decide on the form such consultation should take.

Referendums

It is also suggested that referendums should be introduced. This is one of the mechanisms of direct democracy. A referendum can take many forms. It can be a consultative one, which does not bind the council, but can have a deep influence upon what it does. It can also be binding if the council decided before hand that the results of the referendum should be accepted as is. These methods have been used in some of the developed countries such as the USA and Switzerland. However, one should caution that local referendum can only be used on a limited range of issues, otherwise the result can be voter fatigue. Another important condition is that there should be many opportunities for citizens to be informed about the issue to be voted for. If this kind of discussion is encouraged amongst the public, this will be a major contribution to local democracy. Councils should use referendums as an important tool to give local people a bigger say in the affairs of their communities. As a beginning the government can give councils the power to hold referendum but these would not be obligatory except in certain circumstances where there is a need to do so.

Innovations in Electoral Reforms

It has already been alluded in this article that the 1999 elections were held under a new electoral system. There is no doubt that the old system though with its shortcomings served the country and stood the test of time. There is however, a need to look forward to the first elections in the new millennium. If the basis of local government is representative democracy based on local elections, and then clearly local government will be stronger, the stronger their representatives base. All those concerned with the quality of local democracy will necessarily be interested in improving voter turn out. Quite importantly is to encourage people to register, to remove any disincentive to vote and make the process of voting and counting more manageable. Councils together with political parties should work together with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and expert practitioners to improve on:

- * Maximising registration
- * Encouraging voter participation in elections, especially among the youth
- * Assisting people with disabilities.

Many other methods can be employed to enhance participation. One of these is changing the electoral system (see Molomo in this volume). It is believed that the location of polling stations can also affect voting, with turnout reducing as distance from polling station increases. A research has to be undertaken ascertain this assertion and also identify reasons people put forward for voting.

Training

Training for the improvement of local democracy and good governance is equally important. It should be seen as a means to assist councillors to play an effective role in the working of the council. While councillors with their experience bring diverse contribution to the work of the council that does not mean they come equipped to play that role. This is not an issue for the new councillor alone. Even old councillors need to attend such training. We are aware of the problems associated with training of councillors. It will be difficult as well as costly. What we have in mind here is not formal training. But short term training such as seminars and courses well focused on relevant topics. The world changes rapidly and places more demands upon the council.

In many cases council training and development is often seen as unnecessary, but that can only be, if their role is considered unimportant or it is assumed they come readily equipped for those roles. Commitment to training should be seen as an indication of the importance attached to this role.

The government of Botswana, and the then Ministry of Local Government and Lands demonstrated this commitment to improving local democracy through the running of

several workshops for councillors. The Ministry together with Fredrieck Ebert Foundation (FEF) conducted a series of councillor training workshops for all councillors between 1997 and 1998. Because of the complexity of issues involved in today's local councils, it should be made compulsory that all councillors should complete a minimum training programme for the job. This is more important because there is no specification laid down for knowledge, skills and experience required for one to become a councillor. Under the circumstances, it is important to provide an opportunity for the group to bring them to an enhanced level of competence for their job.

Conclusion

A brief discussion such as this one will not do justice to the kind of complex issues involved in local democracy. The article attempted to demonstrate that although the government of Botswana is fully committed to promoting local democracy through decentralisation processes, there are limitations. Quite a number of issues have to be addressed particularly if councils are to be relevant in the next century. The challenges facing local governments are immense because they are dealing with a more informed and demanding population. Local people are not only looking for services, but also would like jobs, business opportunities, participating and influencing decision making processes in the areas. For local democracy to become a reality, the calibre of local leadership should be addressed. Thus, training should be given a priority to help councillors to do their job effectively.

Notes

¹ Independents are popularly known as Mekoko—literally meaning the cocks.

² BAM stands for Botswana Alliance Movement. This is an alliance of opposition parties including mainly IFP, United Action party (UAP) and BPP. Some opposition parties which were originally members opted out of this merger.

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⁴ Emang Basadi Women's Association organised a number of workshops through Caucus for Women in Politics and attracted women from all political parties.

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