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Enhancing Equity in the Midst of Drought: The Botswana Approach*

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ABSTRACT

In Africa the typical social consequence of drought is an accordion effect in which wealth and income shrink drastically. The poor suffer most severely as their mortality rate rises. Their plight then prompts dramatic increases in international aid. Moving this relief to those in need, however, is usually extremely slow, as indigenous elites and the head of the aid organisations struggle over their relative roles in decision-making.

This article examines how a veritable welfare state has emerged from one of Botswana's most severe droughts and why this deviation from the typical African syndrome has taken place.

Introduction

Botswana, situated on the Kalahari desert and its fringes, is no stranger to the realities of drought, but it has managed to avoid the syndrome of inequitable levels of suffering in its current five-year drought, which began in 1981. Relief and recovery programmes have both protected the rural poor from malnutrition and ensured that they are able to maintain a large proportion of their economic assets. International agencies are so impressed by the country's own relief organisation that they channel all their support through it. The system's popularity with the general population is so great that political observers suspect the government will retain much of the programme as a permanent welfare system.

In most of Botswana rainfall averages between 400 and 500 mm, with some small areas receiving as much as 700 mm and others as little as 250 mm. With such low precipitation, even sorghum and millet, which require relatively little moisture, become high-risk crops, especially since the irregular character of rainfall often produces severe moisture stress during the growing season.

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Furthermore, winter is a dry season; field preparations are often delayed until after the first rains because oxen are not in condition for ploughing.

Botswana alternates between decades with rainfall and decades without rainfall. Drought devastated the country in the 1960s, but in the 1970s grain output met nearly half of the country's needs and the national cattle herd almost doubled. In the 1980s drought returned. While the area planted remained high because of government programmes, the harvested area fell to 15 per cent of 1981, the last normal year. Crop production in tonnage plummeted to one third or less of the 1981 figure: the country has become almost totally dependent on cereal imports.

Nearly half the rural households own some cattle. Their survival strategy during a drought is to sell off part of their herd. As the drought continues, this source of security is greatly reduced since the animals lose weight, calving rates decline, and death rates rise. The owners of smaller herds suffer disproportionately since they do not have the resources to protect their investments, and they need to sell relatively more to survive.

Those without cattle are, however, hardest hit by drought. Foragers, who constitute a significant portion of the lower income quartile, must extend the area over which they search for food. Unfortunately, the rapid expansion of cattle ranches in Botswana during the 1970s has greatly reduced the veld area able to support wildlife and edible plants. Many of the low income groups also depend on occasional labour with their more well-to-do neighbours to provide additional food or the cash with which to buy it. During the last five years of drought, opportunities for such employment have shrunk to almost half those of normal times, thus placing further strain on families that do not own cattle.

Protection and recovery

The objectives of Botswana's drought relief and recovery programme are two: first, to protect the nutritional status and health of vulnerable groups and to protect the economic assets of the rural population to insure rapid recovery from the drought. The programme is composed of four basic elements. First, the government has established a system of food distribution to supplement the diets of pregnant and lactating women, young children, and tubercular out-patients and to provide complete rations to remote area dwellers and the destitute. Currently, a third of the population receives rations, and since most of the rations are shared with household members, it is estimated that over 70 per cent of the rural population benefits from food aid.

The second element is a rapidly expanding Labour-Based Relief Programme (LBRP) which provides opportunities for earning cash incomes on village improvement projects. The objective is not only to replace income lost because of the drought but also to enable poorer households to invest in

productive assets. As far as possible, projects are labour-intensive and make use of traditional skills. One of the more noteworthy projects employs women to hand stamp sorghum grain into flour for a school feeding programme. Others involve the construction or improvement of local infrastructure, especially roads, dams, firebreaks, drift fences, airfields, and community vegetable gardens.

Agricultural relief and recovery measures are the third focus of the programme. These include the distribution of free seed, grants for destumping, clearance, and ploughing of arable land, the subsidised sale to farm implements and livestock for use in ploughing, the purchase of older cattle and small-stock at guaranteed prices, the provision of animal feed at subsidised prices, and assistance to farmer groups to improve their water supplies.

Finally the government has expanded its efforts to provide clean and dependable sources of water. In the short run, villages that lack adequate water sources are provided with temporary supplies, while in the long run the government aims to rehabilitate old boreholes or construct new ones where needed.

Distributional effect

The success of these schemes in protecting the nutritional status and health of vulnerable groups is best reflected in the condition of the children. In the early 1980s the percentage of undernourished children (defined as less than 80 per cent of the expected weight for their age) increased slightly over normal trends. Currently, the percentage of undernourished has fallen below pre-drought levels, even though the drought has worsened over the last year. While there are no figures on earlier years, those who have experienced previous droughts say that the decline in suffering among the disadvantaged is dramatic. At the most graphic level, unlike the 1979/80 drought, which lasted only a year, there is no evidence of death by starvation and there has been little or no increase in the number of public beggars.

The programme has actually altered the distribution of food in the country as a whole. The amount of food per capita in the rural areas is greater than in non-drought years. Moreover, the available food is probably more equitably distributed because it is channelled through government programmes.

Given the intensity and length of the current drought, the government has, for the most part, also been successful in maintaining rural assets. The percentage of traditional household farms with arable land has fallen by less than 17 per cent, while the total number of households engaged in farming has declined by less than five per cent¹. Households with adequate supplies of labour have been able to earn income through the government destumping programme while increasing their hectareage of ploughable land.

Since the programme is focused not only on protecting the health of the poor but also on productive assets within the rural sector, distribution of some aid has been far from equal. For example, during the most recent agricultural season, the government subsidised the ploughing of up to 13 hectares of land per household. However, since most households have less than five hectares of land, only the wealthier were able to take full advantage of the programme. Similarly, it is mostly the larger producers who participate in agricultural development programmes which provide free seed and production tools at a fraction of cost. Owners of large cattle herds have been much better able to purchase government-subsidised food and to borrow money for drilling new boreholes than have their less-well-off compatriots.

Such forms of maldistribution may in fact be necessary to protect the income sources of the poor in the rural economy. In particular, many female-headed households are dependent on employment opportunities provided by the larger farmers. In protecting the capability of the larger households to farm, the government is also securing the employment they provide.

The government can more correctly be faulted for not targeting more drought relief to the poorest households. The amount of aid that female-headed households receive is inadequate if the mother is unable to engage in LBRP due to child care constraints or if no LBRP project is available in the immediate area. Since food aid is intended only to supplement the household food supply of vulnerable members, the total quantity which a household receives is inadequate if there is no additional means of support. Reports from several districts indicate that some families are coping with this problem by keeping school-age children home in order to obtain larger take-home rations.

Absence of patronage

Despite this targeting problem, Botswana's drought relief programmes have generally succeeded in preventing the typical accordion effect of drought in Africa. The reasons are several. In part, Botswana can afford to take care of the poor during drought because it has a substantial income from diamonds, accounting for almost half of government revenues. But national wealth does not translate automatically into policies that promote justice and are effectively implemented. To understand Botswana's situation, we need to look at the political context in which drought relief takes place.

First, the political elite are mostly owners of large cattle herds from which they obtain a very reasonable income. Top government officials need not look upon positions of political authority as sinecures required for personal economic advancement. Thus it has been possible for a civil bureaucracy to develop which serves various sectors of the economy rather than functioning as a source of employment and patronage for the leaders of the ruling party and its followers. Though the government may not be highly efficient, it is at

least not burdened with corruption and other forms of patronage politics.

Drought relief benefits from this environment. The programme can be built around existing ministry staff capable of performing specific programme activities. The Ministry of Local Government and Lands, through its Food Resources Department, manages food aid imports, local purchases and distribution. The Ministry of Agriculture administers farm relief and recovery through its extension staff and veterinary cadres. The Ministry of Mineral Resources and Water Affairs takes care of water supply problems. The Ministry of Health monitors the nutrition levels and organises on-site feeding at its health centres. The Ministry of Education directs the feeding of primary school children. Several officials in the Ministry of Finance provide overall coordination of these operations, with the help of early-warning technical personnel drawn from several ministries.

This organisation did not spring immediately into existence at the inception of the present drought. Rather it has evolved since the middle 1970s. Almost every year the government hires a number of consultants, usually expatriates, to evaluate parts of the programme. Particularly substantial reviews took place after the 1979-80 drought and then after three years of the present one. Policy-makers have debated each of the resulting reports including proposals for reformulating policies and changes in organisations. A number of these proposals have eventually been adopted. The consequence is that the effectiveness of drought relief has steadily been improving. The consultants have been particularly effective in raising issues related to the condition of the poor and the need to target this population.

The government's willingness to commit itself to improving its drought relief programme, and especially one that serves the poor, is critical to Botswana's success. This commitment is very much tied to the democratic character of the political system. Since 1965 the country has had regular elections every four to five years. Although the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has always won, it has recently been seriously threatened by the Botswana National Front (BNF), particularly in the cities.

BDP politicians have come to see the drought relief programme as their best means of countering the BNF threat. The programme reduces the motivation of peasants to migrate to the cities, where they are likely to be jobless and easily subject to mobilisation by the opposition. Even more important, it provides economic security to the core of the Party's rural constituency, the peasants. The impact of the programme in this regard cannot be overestimated. Besides the food distribution itself, LBRP creates a number of jobs comparable to those lost from the drought. This last year the daily wage of P2,25 was slightly more than maids and security guards earned in the cities and considerably more than cattle herders could obtain at cattle posts.²

Citizens rights

The 1984 elections were critical in bringing BDP to see the political value of drought relief. The Cabinet decided that an expansion of the drought relief budget from P12 million in 1983-84 to P40 million in 1984-85 would be a dramatic means to secure votes in the rural areas. P40 million was well above the figure the Ministry of Finance recommended and one-third more, it turned out, than the various ministries could even mobilise themselves to spend. While BDP lost a number of seats in the cities, its rural support remained relatively solid. The party's leadership reacted by further expanding the drought relief budget. For 1985-86 it is P47 million.

This concern to carry popular support has also meant that the politicians have wanted drought programmes to have a community input. LBRP projects are initially selected by local village development committees and then approved by district drought committees composed of civil servants. The administrators of drought programmes in the districts are required, furthermore, to report on a regular basis to elected local councils, where they may be severely criticised.

The great popularity of the programme in the rural areas raises real questions as to whether the government will close it down when the drought is over. Many appear to believe that the government should continue to help them with their ploughing, provide jobs in the off-season, and serve free food to the children at the schools and health centres. From the peasants' point of view, if the government can afford such services in hard times, it should be even more able to do so when rains are good. In a very real sense, these programmes are beginning to be perceived as a defacto right of Botswana citizens. While many in top political and civil service circles might like to redirect drought programme funds to more development-oriented activities, mass demands to preserve the new rights may make the change impossible.

Like social welfare programmes in the West, drought relief in Botswana is politically popular because it reaches almost all the population, not simply the poor, and provides tangible help in a time of need. Foreign advisors in particular would like to target a higher portion of the drought programme on the poor.

Any attempt to do so, however, would be politically risky. Among the rest of the voters, who are also suffering from the drought, politicians fear there would be deep resentment that the poor are receiving more than their fair share. In this sense, drought relief cannot reverse the existing economic distribution. Rather Botswana's programmes prevent drought from falling more heavily on the poor than on the rest of the population. Elections thus also place a limit on the extent to which drought relief can be used to achieve social justice.

Foreign influence minimised

A final element in Botswana's success is that conflict between international donors and the Government has been minimal. Since the government has organised itself to respond to the drought in a relatively effective manner, aid agencies are very willing to work through the existing structure. The government's continuous monitoring and modification of the drought relief system over the last decade has meant that it is well prepared to control the role of international organisations within the country. Even expatriates required to provide specialised skills have been incorporated into regular government agencies as technical assistance personnel. Their presence is not dependent on the drought. The influx of foreign personnel during the drought itself is further minimised by the fact that the government hires individuals and organisations in the private sector to undertake such activities as transporting and milling grain, storing food, and ploughing fields. The result is that additional foreign aid required for the drought consists almost entirely of food imports channelled into a fully functioning system.

Conclusion

None of this should lead to the conclusion that Botswana's drought relief programme is without problems. Many feel that more resources should be targeted on the poor. Informed observers also have other concerns. The ploughing subsidies appear in many cases to be lining the pockets of the tractor owners, with little resulting crop output. The government is promoting destumping, ploughing, and planting with what seems to be marginal attention to adverse effects on the country's fragile ecology. Little is being done to improve the productivity of smallholders. Paying the villagers through LBRP over a considerable period of time appears to be eroding communities' willingness to help themselves.

While all these criticisms have some validity, the fact remains that they involve questions about the effectiveness of particular aspects of the drought relief programme. Everyone recognises that the government has succeeded in protecting almost the entire society, including the poor, from the adverse effects of drought. Now all social groups are at least holding their own while waiting for the rains to come.

The relevance of Botswana's experience to other African countries at first glance appears questionable. After all, none have the combination of a steady and substantial export income, an electoral democracy, and a relatively uncorrupt bureaucracy. Nevertheless, if the popularity of Botswana's programme is any indication, trying to replicate the approach as far as is possible may be politically rewarding.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ministry of Agriculture, Agricultural Statistics (Gaborone, 1981 and 1984). The percentage of households actually farming has declined by 25%. It is expected, however, that many of the households that have maintained their land but are not engaged in crop production because of the drought will resume planting once the drought ends.
2. The value of the Botswana pula has fluctuated recently between US\$0.61 and \$0.46, largely because of its connection to the South African rand.