



68th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 18-24, 2002

Code Number: 029-114-E
Division Number: VIII
Professional Group: Africa Section
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 114
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

Community Information Structures in Botswana: A Challenge for Librarians

Batlang Comma Serema

University of Botswana, Gaborone
Botswana

E-mail: seremabc@hotmail.com

Abstract:

There are structures at community levels (district and village levels) in Botswana, which produce information for development purposes. Mostly this information end up in village development plans and district development plans. This information is however not captured by libraries and stored for future use. The information from these structures is usually by way of word of mouth because not all of our people can read and write. Again not all of these structures record their proceedings, which can later be stored for future use. But at these structures a lot of important information is discussed which feed into the development process of the country. This presents a challenge for librarians working at community level. For instance how can they capture this information within their libraries? Our public libraries stores material mostly which is foreign and which cannot be accessed by the people within the rural communities. What this means is that libraries at community level has simply locked out communities. In order for communities to come closer to libraries there is need to repackage information from the information structures outlined above. This might include the use of audiovisual techniques to capture information from these community structures. This paper discusses these information structures and the challenges facing librarians.

1. Community Development Structures

The institutional set up of planning in Botswana can be divided into three levels: Community Level, District Level and Central Government Level. In this paper I am concentrating on information structures at the community level. The institutions at the community level, which are involved in the development process can be divided into two main categories: The *Traditional Institutions* – so called because of their pre-colonial origin – are the chieftaincy, the *kgotla* and the wards. The *kgotla* represents the “institution” where commonly consensus can be arrived at and where development initiatives and participation can be encouraged. It is a traditional authority, chiefs, sub-chiefs, village headmen and ward heads are critical links between communities and government authorities. All villages have a *Kgotla* and the village *Kgotla* is led by the Chief who is responsible for calling the *Kgotla* meetings, trying cases under customary law, and is involved in village development. The *modern institutions* – so called because most of them were created after independence e.g. the Village Development Committee (VDC), Village Health Committee (VHC), Parents Teachers Association (PTA), Village Literacy Committees (VLC), Village Extension Team (VET) and other village organisations such as voluntary organisations like Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), Botswana Red Cross, Botswana Council of Women (BCW), churches, burial societies, farmers committees. All committees report to the Village Development Committee (VDC). The VDCs were established by a Presidential Directive of 1968 for the purpose of implementing development programmes in villages. It is responsible for all village development matters and coordinates all village institutions’ activities. It is however responsible to the *kgotla* on matters related to development.

The functions of the VDC as outlined in the Botswana Government, District Planning Handbook (1996:56) are to:

- Identify and discuss local needs;
- Help villagers to prioritize their local needs;
- Formulate proposals for the solution of identified local needs;
- Determine the extent to which the people can satisfy their identified needs on self help basis;
- Develop a plan of action for their village area;
- Solicit the assistance of donors and other development agencies;
- Mobilize the community and its institutions for development action;
- Provide a forum of contact between village leaders, politicians and District Authorities to enhance the flow of development information; and
- Represent villagers in development matters and act as a source and reference point in matters pertaining to village development.

A VDC consists of 10 members elected at the *Kgotla* meeting. They are charged with development matters in the village. They then report on these at the *Kgotla* meetings where they can generate discussion with members of the village. The District Officer (Development) who is working under the District Commissioner and the Council Planning Officer (CPO) working under the Council Executive Officer liaise with the village committee to tap information. Most of the time they get this information through *kgotla* meetings where the VDC chairman briefs the participants on development matters. The VDC in doing this will have met and solicited ideas from all other village committees particularly the VET (which consists of all central and local government officers working in a village). During the preparation of the Village Development Plan the VDC should also meet with, chiefs and councillors. Prioritization of projects is emphasised and officers should be ready to provide their technical expertise to advise the communities on Government policies and standards. Most villages do not have libraries and I found out that most of the time VDC members could lack relevant information. Thus they are left to seek advice from technocrats and community consultation, through the word of mouth for example at small *kgotla*, *kgotla*, funerals, PTA meetings, and most of them said that they listen to Radio Botswana (RB) to

get information on development. They said they do not use libraries because it is meant for students who can read and write. This is indeed a great challenge to librarians, how can communities be made part of our clientele?

The next institutional level is that of the District. At this level the most important institutions are the District Administration (established by 1965 Act of Parliament), Tribal Administration (established by 1965 Act of Parliament), Land Boards (established by 1968/1970 Act of Parliament) and District and Town Councils (established by 1965 Act of Parliament).

The District Commissioner (DC) who is responsible to the Ministry of Local Government and is a senior representative of Central Government in the District heads the District Administration. He/she is the chairperson of the District Development Committee, which is in charge of preparing the District Development Plans, thus the coordination function of the DC is very critical. The Town and District Councils are locally elected bodies. These institutions have formal authorities to take decisions within their localities. They have the power and the discretion to allocate resources within their area of jurisdiction. They exist however side by side with locally based officials of various government departments. The councils carry out statutory duties through a system of standing committees. These include such committees as Education, Health, Works, Trade and Licensing, Physical Planning, etc. The Land Boards are responsible for leases and allocation of tribal land including open wells and boreholes. In other words they confer land use rights on individuals or groups. The Land Boards fall under the Ministry of Local Government. Tribal Administration has both traditional and developmental duties. Chieftainship is one of the oldest institutions in Botswana. Chiefs have many responsibilities including maintenance of law and order, administration of justice, serving as spokespersons of their tribes, etc. The Chief, who is also the Head of the Tribal Administration, is by virtue of his position, an ex-officio member of the District Council. The chiefs have considerable personal and political influence, popularity and legitimacy.

A presidential Directive established the District Development Committee (DDC) in 1970, under the chairmanship of the DC. It is the most significant institution at the district level for coordination of development activities. The DDC's terms of reference listed in the Botswana Government, District Planning Handbook (1996:51) are:

- To coordinate the activities of all local and central government agencies in the district with a view to promoting development.
- To serve as a planning body for the district.
- To advise the district agencies on all matters relating to development.
- To coordinate the planning, management, and implementation of district development plans, annual plans, and any other plans in the district.
- To coordinate the development activities of NGOs in so far as they affect Government and/or communities, with a view to harmonising them with Government policy and programmes.
- To monitor the process of decentralisation with a view to advising Government on the possible course of action.

In order for the DDC to function well it has the support of many other sub-committees, which usually report their activities during its meetings; these are listed in the District Planning Handbook as follows: Production Development Committee (PDC), District Extension Team (DET), District Land Use Planning Unit (DLUPU), District Health Committee (DHC), District Drought Relief Committee (DDRC), District Education Planning Committee (DEPC) Plan Management Committee (PMC).

As part of consultation for the District Development Plans a District Development Conference is convened. At this level Chiefs, Councillors, VDC Chairpersons, Members of Parliament, VET Chairpersons, all District Development Committees and District Extension Team members meet. The DO

(D) and CPO present an overview of the success and failures of the past plan for the entire District. After reviewing the past plan the District Development Conference comes up with a plan for the next period. Thus all village plans are summarised into a DDP. It is emphasised that all stakeholders “should be given equal opportunities to contribute to the debate, since this is the most crucial process at district level” (District Planning Manual 2000:59). The DO (D) and CPO will then produce a detailed DDP after the draft plan has gone through the necessary steps and copies provided to VDCs.

2. Consultation

It has to be mentioned here that DO (Ds) and CPOs are all economists. Most of them possess second degrees in economics. Unlike Planning Officers at the ministries they are however not seconded to local authorities but are employed directly by them. They were however found to be very much in touch with the headquarters. It is their belief that policy formulation depends largely on past experience than information in libraries. One of them who is a DO (D) said, “decisions taken in the past will normally influence current decisions”. District Development Plans preparation involves consultation between Districts and various government ministries. Thus DO (Ds) and CPOs have to be in constant contact with colleagues at the ministries. The Districts get information about Central Government planned activities in districts from the ministries. Thus Central Government officials and Ministers also visit the Districts and release information on government policies and explain these policies. The head of the Planning Unit in each Ministry is the link person with the Districts. Although this is the case other field officers contribute to this consultation to assist with the information for policy making.

It is my view that consultation has to be a core activity for all local authorities in Botswana. Consultation and communication strategies need to be integrated as the core of local decision-making. The consultation also needs to be made accessible. For instance one VDC chairman told me that sometimes they are given major reports like the Village Development Plan written in English to read and to verify certain things and comment. He admitted that sometimes it is not always easy for them to understand these reports. Particularly councillors must be given an innovative development programme to help them in delivering community leadership, which will help generate information for decision-making and thus help transform services. This will ensure that people can have a say in local decisions and are able to choose those who take decisions affecting local communities. Although Botswana implies ownership in terms of its policies as National Development Plans are generated it is important that it continues to improve ways of consultation process. The consultation process the National Development Plans are following might in many ways be eroded in the future if not always reviewed and strengthened. This therefore means that as we enter into this global village government should continue to find ways of integrating the local people in the policy process.

Although there is a general lack of information sources like libraries in the local authorities the consultation programme adopted by the government of Botswana, which is described in chapter 4, is generally acceptable to my respondents. Most of them felt that if government could tackle illiteracy the system will generally work efficiently and effectively.

Kgotla

A gathering of the *morafe* or nation is called a *kgotla* meeting, it is a place of community discussion. The agenda for a *kgotla* meeting is usually the responsibility of the Chief who also summons people to attend. At a *kgotla* tribesmen and women meet to discuss development issues, tribal affairs or anything of interest to the tribe. Ministers, Civil Servants, Members of Parliament and Councillors ask the Chiefs to call *kgotla* meetings so that they can disseminate information on development plans and assistance programmes to the people. All such discussion is done in a non-partisan manner. Members of the village, city or town feel free when attending *kgotla* meetings to speak their minds on whatever is being discussed. A *kgotla* is

actually not just in villages, they are also in towns and cities. A *kgotla* presents a neutral area for consultation. The Ministers give out information and they also on the other hand receive information, proposals, and criticisms of government policies from the community.

People attend *kgotla* meetings without fear or favour and they express their ideas freely. I observed two *kgotla* meetings and realised that a *kgotla* presents a good institution for policy making. Information takes centre stage at the *kgotla* as communities voice their concerns and proposals and Ministers and civil servants presents and at times defend government policies. There is a two-way communication in the *kgotla*.

Freedom Square

The Freedom Square is another platform usually used by politicians or political parties to inform communities about their party policies and get feedback from communities. Unlike the *kgotla* meeting, where there is the Chief as the custodian of the *kgotla*, Freedom square meetings are held by politicians. Any politician can go to the police and ask for a permit to hold a freedom square meeting, popularly referred to as rally. He/she then announces through loudspeakers and Radio Botswana the venue and time for the rally, to the public and organises his/her own chairperson and starts the rally at the Freedom Square.

Freedom squares meetings or rallies as they are usually called are advertisements for political parties. Politicians use them to sell their party. During my fieldwork I observed three freedom square meetings and realised that politicians in most cases do not want to take criticism as they do in *kgotla* meetings. They often do not even leave much time for communities to discuss what they presented which is very much different from the *kgotla* meetings which presents a two way communication. A freedom square meeting presents at times noisy debates. There is a lot of heckling and at times really the message is not always clear and not well received. Seepapitso found in Holm and Molutsi (1988:213) that:

In so far as politicians do talk about policies, they seem to be solely concerned with promoting their own, leading one to believe that public concerns come second to their wishes...Botswana are still not politically educated. This is why the majority only attend assemblies of parties to which they are affiliated. They often expect to get what their representatives promise, forgetting that they as voters must impress upon their representatives the programmes, which ought to be undertaken, and the manner in which government ought to behave. In many cases the electorate does not even appear to know the contents of the manifesto of the parties they support. They expect to be told by way of mouth, which unfortunately does not usually happen at freedom squares.

3 Participatory Rural Appraisal

The way in which information flows in rural communities is through what is commonly known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). PRA facilitators hand the planning initiative over to local people. They are encouraged to use their first hand knowledge and expertise of practices and priorities to construct charts, maps and matrices all of which yield information making it easier to inform policy making. Thus the PRA method is based on local knowledge, community resources and institutions and the attraction of outside help such as from government technical and extension officers, NGOs and International Organisations.

PRA enables communities to identify and define their own way of sustainable development, a development strategy that is based on real needs, within the skills, capacities and capabilities of their local institutions. In addition to enabling communities to be involved in their own development process, PRA has been a useful tool for identifying community institutions, which can carry out development plans.

PRA enables communities to dovetail the roles of external agencies that can be called upon to provide assistance. It places a premium on community articulation and ranking of their development priorities. This is a major departure from traditional methods, which rely on experts to do this. A PRA exercise devises a management plan known as a Community Action Plan (CAP) or Resource Management Plan (RMP) which helps to guide the community as it implements various programmes. The PRA approach focuses more explicitly on the role of community institutions and practices, in an effort to identify development plans that community organisations can sustain. In part, a focus on community institutions is a result of the impact of a now abundant literature on participation, capacity building and community institutions, which suggests that sustainable development is possible only if development projects and programmes are built on the priorities and capacities that communities themselves identify (Egerton PRA handbook.2000).

It is worth noting that while PRA does not claim to be a substitute for government or donor funds, it attempts to ensure that community development planning is done with the participation of beneficiaries. PRA is flexible enough to be adapted to any field of development. It has been applied in the field of health, agriculture, and natural resource management, management of biodiversity, community wildlife management, education and urban planning. PRA assumes that communities have knowledge and information, which needs to be organised. What can our libraries do to help organise community information? PRA also assumes that the community may not appreciate the enormous power that this information can yield nor how systematizing this information can help rank problems, select options to solve problems, sensitise community groups to take action and attract external agents for assistance. It promotes and recognizes the value of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (ITK). Is there anything our librarians could do to ensure communities appreciate the enormous power information can yield?

4 Government Officers and Information

The local authorities rely on Council Planning Officers (CPO) and District Officers (Development) (DO) (D) at both District and Community level to harness information for development and not so librarians. Although there are no libraries and other centrally located information sources like the Central Statistical Office (CSO) and Botswana Institute of Development and Policy Analysis (BIDPA) at the local authorities level, the officers do gather information from the local knowledge of the local communities. They also get information from the centre by attending meetings at the centre. Sometimes people working at central government do visit them at the rural areas and disseminate information on policies. The Ministers and Members of Parliament and Councillors also hold *Kgotla* meetings regularly to inform the communities about government policies and to solicit information from the local people. Most of the consultants hired by government do visit the local areas frequently to collect information for policy making during consultancies.

5 Community Information flow

The way in which information flows in rural areas is threefold: First there is the community leaders' institutional arrangement of the *Kgotla* system, second we have the political arrangement of the political rally system and lastly the government institutional arrangement of civil service. At the *kgotla* tribesmen and women meet to discuss development issues, tribal affairs or anything of interest to the tribe. Ministers, Civil Servants, Members of Parliament and Councillors ask the Chiefs to call *kgotla* meetings so that they can disseminate information on development plans and assistance programmes to the people. All such discussion is done in a non-partisan manner. The political system usually involves Councillors, MPs, potential Councillors and potential MPs and politicians in general. Usually these people use the Freedom Square as a platform to inform communities about their party policies and get feedback from communities. Unlike the *kgotla* meeting, where there is the Chief as the custodian of the *kgotla*, Freedom square meetings are held by politicians. Lastly as mentioned above local institutions besides the general

civil servants rely on Council Planning Officers (CPO) and District Officers (Development) (DO (D) at both District and Community level to harness information for development.

In a study I did entitled: *Information Infrastructure for Public Policy Making in Botswana*, which I did recently one of the issues my respondents mentioned at the districts was that of transparency and dissemination of information on various programmes. My respondents felt that on many occasions the rural people are not well enough informed to be able to be part of the decision making. One of the respondents who is a chief said,

You always feel that the officers do not want you to know more about policy. They just want that information to be their own preserve instead of disseminating it to all the community leaders who can inform their decisions. So when an officer is absent it is very much difficult to disseminate information.

However one of the officers who is a DO (D) blamed the whole thing on the lack of decentralization of information structures. He felt that while at the central government level there are departmental libraries, senior and well-educated officers the rural areas lack such facilities and resources. It was his view that the policies are good and responding to the chief's comment above he said this is just "an administrative problem" it does not mean that the system is "bad". He suggested that with well-educated officers and good community libraries in Botswana the planning system would continue to be better and work well. In fact none of the district headquarters I visited had a departmental or a central library let alone a documentation room. The officers put their information in their offices and often it is reported that they leave with the information when they are transferred. It is important to build libraries for local authorities as public libraries cannot be expected to provide the information needs of local authorities. However one of my respondents felt that although the public libraries cannot be expected to be supplying many of the local authorities information needs they could be enhanced to be able to fill the gap created by the absence of local authorities libraries. It was also the feeling of my respondents that these libraries should be automated so that their catalogue could be linked to information sources in Gaborone (the capital city). So construction of libraries in rural areas and automation of the libraries are issues that librarians will have to look at.

6 The Challenges of Librarians

- Construction of rural and local authority libraries
- Automation of rural and local authority Libraries
- Repackaging of indigenous knowledge
- Ensuring that public libraries serve local communities not just students
- Ensuring community structures record their proceedings
- Viewing community development structures as information sources

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