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Managing Resources and the Democratic Order: The Experience of Botswana

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ABSTRACT

Africa is a potentially rich continent that remains one of the poorest in the world. For most African countries, an abundance of resources has not only contributed to underdevelopment but has undermined democracy. Public office is a major source of wealth, power and career advancement, in part because the private sector remains small and underdeveloped. The squalor in Africa comes about in part because resources are diverted to support the expensive lifestyles of politicians and to prolong their stay in office. Botswana may be an exception. The country has not experienced 'spoils politics' and instability – or even leadership ripples – in the same way as other mineral-rich African countries have.

This paper assesses possible explanations for Botswana's relative economic and democratic success. It argues that minerals alone are not a sufficient condition to account for Botswana's unique performance. It identifies other key factors like the role of its leaders, its political culture and its ability to adapt democratic principles to local conditions. It suggests that the country has lessons to offer to the continent – but warns of challenges that could cause the Botswana 'miracle' to fade.

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INTRODUCTION

Africa is a potentially rich continent that could offer economic opportunity and the prospect of development to all its people. Most African countries are endowed with minerals. For instance, 12 of the 18 diamond-producing countries in the world are African.[1] Nigeria is the leading African oil producer at 2.1 million barrels a day, while Angola is the second biggest oil producer and the fourth largest producer of diamonds in Africa.[2] Guinea Bissau produces 181 400 barrels of oil a day, making it the fourth largest producer on the continent.[3] However, these resource-endowed countries are yet to realise their full potential. In one way or the other, they have been afflicted by problems of unethical leadership, corruption, clientelism, disease, poverty, conflict and war. They have also been harmed by 'spoils politics', a phenomenon that occurs 'when the primary goal of those competing for political office or power is self-enrichment'.[4] In part, the problems arise because of the need to exploit these minerals. Neopatrimonialism rules in much of Africa – the practice of awarding political and economic benefits to politicians and their followers to ensure their support for government – under which presidentialism (centralisation of political power on an individual) and clientelism (reward of supporters) are embedded.[5] This gives rise to the abuse of public resources.

All these factors dashed the dream harboured by many at independence some 40 or 50 years ago: the dream of a continent of promise. Independence often delivered not transformed lives but misery and shattered hopes because most regimes in Africa 'demonstrated very little developmental capacity'.[6] This gave rise to a perception that African countries in general were poorly managed and suffered from poor governance (and, by extension, poor leadership). While this is true for most, there are few exceptions. Botswana is one exception.

MANAGING RESOURCES AND THE DEMOCRATIC ORDER

Two key questions arise: What are the ingredients of Botswana's success in managing natural resources and the democratic order? And what lessons can the country offer to other African countries?

At independence in 1966, Botswana was barely known. Neglected by Britain, the colonial power, about 90% of the population lived in abject poverty.[7] Lacking economic diversification and modern production methods, heavily reliant on peasant agriculture, Botswana became a 'labour reserve' for South African mines.[8] It had just 13 kilometers of tarred road, 22 university graduates and a per capita income of $60.[9] Today, its economy has changed dramatically. The discovery of minerals, especially diamonds, immediately after independence led to phenomenal economic growth averaging 13.9% between 1965 and 1980, and 11.3% between 1980 and 1989.[10] The country has leapt from being one of the poorest in Africa to middle-income status as assessed by the World Bank. Most analysts regard it as a star performer and a model of economic success.[11] In particular, they note the way the country managed its windfall when diamonds were discovered. Botswana, with vast diamond resources, avoided the high levels of corruption and instability found in some other resource-rich African countries, partly because the post-independence political and bureaucratic elite were relatively well established and did not rely on their office to accumulate wealth.[12] Central to Botswana's success is the relationship between the government and De Beers, which is pivotal to the country's political economy and governance. Through this partnership, the Botswana government and De Beers jointly formed De Beers Botswana Mining Company (or DEBSWANA), which mined and managed Botswana diamonds. The agreement between Botswana and De Beers provides for a 50/50% ownership and allocation of diamond revenues. This partnership has been described as one the most successful and beneficial to be entered between a developing country and a multi-national company.[13]

In addition, Botswana was politically stable and was counted as the oldest multiparty democracy in Africa, in contrast to many on the continent that became one-party states. Since independence it has held regular, free and competitive elections in terms of the Constitution. Even so, Botswana's democracy is characterised by one-party dominance, although the popular vote for the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has declined over the years, from 80.4% in 1965[14] to 52% in 2004[15]. Yet its 'first past the post' electoral system meant that the BDP continued to win a majority of seats in parliament because of the absence of proportional representation. For instance, in 2004 the BDP won 44 of the 57 directly elected seats but retained a majority of 77% in parliament despite getting barely more than half of the popular vote.[16] It is also true that the opposition has performed consistently badly for a number of reasons. These include poor organisation, opposition votes split by fragmentation, the lack of state funding for political parties, and an electoral system that favours the incumbent, which has state patronage at its disposal. Currently, two opposition parties are represented in the 57 directly-elected seats in parliament. The Botswana National Front (BNF) has 11 seats (down from 12 in 2004) and the Botswana Congress Party (BCP), one seat. The BDP has 45, one more than it held after the 2004 election, thanks to a by-election win. Four specially elected ministers of parliament – nominated by the president and endorsed by parliament – bring the ruling party's total to 49.

Nevertheless, the country is perceived to be a political success story, especially when it comes to leadership succession. Its system provides for the vice-president to take over automatically if the president retires, resigns or is incapacitated. Both Festus Mogae and his successor, Ian Khama, gained the presidency in this manner. Some criticise automatic leadership succession for allowing an incumbent to anoint a successor. Nevertheless, the country has remained peaceful and has avoided succession crises or ripples such as occurred in South Africa.

INGREDIENTS OF BOTSWANA'S SUCCESS IN MANAGING RESOURCES AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

Every country has a unique history and factors peculiar to it may explain success and failure. Thus Botswana may not be a model for all, but it can provide lessons for its peers. Certainly, its success was not derived from its mineral windfall alone. This paper seeks to explain why it did not go the way of other African countries whose mineral wealth did not bring development to their people.

Botswana's economic success can be attributed to the unique role of the state from the time of independence, and the development institutions it fostered. One such institution is the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP). The MFDP combined finance and development planning into a single powerful ministry, linking government revenue to specific development projects. Only projects in the national plan were budgeted for. The national objective was to achieve economic independence, social justice, sustainable development and rapid economic growth.[17] Planning was intended to 'ensure that maximum benefit is derived from the limited financial resources available to Government by prioritising policies, programmes and projects. [It] also allows government to set targets against which its performance can be objectively evaluated'.[18] To demonstrate the importance Botswana attached to this ministry, it was placed in the office of the vice-president.[19] It was not only 'the institutional brain of the economic policymaking process'[20] but also 'the institutional nerve centre'[21] of the state. It is the institution that ensures that projects are not only in the National Development Plans but have also been budgeted for. It oversees approved plans and offers economic advice and information to government departments.[22] 'No expenditure can be incurred ... which has not been included in the plan', and when ministries submit projects for inclusion they are often required to ensure that costs are reasonable and within government constraints.[23] The MFDP is run by trained professionals with expertise in economic policymaking. Appointments on merit rather than partisan loyalty help ensure stability.[24]

Wallis suggests that two key points were instrumental in ensuring an effective process:

> First, the Botswana case suggests that political commitment and support for planning makes a substantial difference. The first president (Seretse Khama) and his senior ministers showed greater support for development planning than has often been the case elsewhere. Second, planning and budgeting have been closely linked.[25]

It is this close connection between planning and budgeting, backed by a committed political state structure, that is missing in most countries.[26] The other unique feature was that the process was decentralised, not centralised, as in most African countries.[27] Planning within a market economy meant that it delivered on development promises. And its planning institution had 'power, authority, technical expertise and insulation in shaping the fundamental thrusts of development policy'[28], setting it apart from most African countries.

Another distinctive feature was that its political leadership realised that it was not enough simply to plan; proper implementation was necessary. This was clearly articulated by the first president, Seretse Khama, when he stated:

> "My government is aware, too, that planning by itself is not enough, that efficient implementation of the Plan is even more important and [the government promised that this responsibility is carried out]…the energies of the nation must now be devoted to the economic and social development of the country".[29]

This statement demonstrated a will to ensure that things got done.

At independence, Botswana – with its 22 graduates – lacked the technical expertise to run the public service.[30] It did not follow the example of its peers in rushing to install Batswana nationals irrespective of merit. Instead, 'considerable emphasis [was] placed upon the recruitment of highly competent economist cadre for the planning organisation', and to ensure this, 'there [was] a relatively high dependence on expatriates'[31]. Taylor noted that 'expatriates were retained (as opposed to much of the rest of Africa) in order to help train a local, but competent, and educated civil service'.[32] And 'through effective use of expatriate technical assistance and steady development of local capabilities, the country has achieved a remarkable record of economic planning and management'.[33] One result was that 'a strong policy-analysis capability was established, together with a planning staff which was continuously involved in budgetary and economic planning'.[34]

In short, Botswana built public institutions that remained professional and not subject to whim or personal rule. Somolekae observes that 'Botswana's bureaucracy has remained one of the most effective and corruption-free in Africa' and enjoyed 'far greater institutional autonomy than its counterparts elsewhere in the region'.[35] Taylor argues that the MFDP's close links with the executive not only protected it from societal or public pressure, but gave rise to a more or less autonomous, strong and effective bureaucracy.[36] However, it could be argued that this made the ministry more beholden to the president and less responsive to other democratic interests, unlike the situation in most African countries where bureaucratic institutions were 'neutralised' immediately after independence.[37] Leftwich argues that in developmental states 'both the developmental determination of the elite and the relative autonomy of the state have helped to shape very powerful, highly competent and insulated bureaucracies with authority to direct and manage the broad shape of economic and social development'.[38] Chalmers Johnson says of Japan that 'the first element of the [developmental] model is the existence of a small, inexpensive, but elite state bureaucracy staffed by the best managerial talent available in the system'.[39]

Moreover, Holm asserts that 'lack of democratic control over the state bureaucracy has been central in Botswana's development' as 'top bureaucrats excluded elected politicians from most key decisions'.[40] Indeed, Presidents Seretse Khama and Ketumile Masire instructed politicians to deal with senior bureaucrats, who were equally directed not to give any political favours.[41] As Holm puts it: 'The leadership of the Botswana state, namely permanent secretaries and the first two presidents, have taken advantage of the state's autonomy to implement an ambitious development agenda'.[42]

The bureaucracy in Botswana not only implemented, but also influenced, economic development. Somolekae argues that the policymaking process 'reveals the extent to which the bureaucracy is influential in initiating policy and determining its final content' and more often than not 'by the time [it] goes out to be scrutinised by the political leadership and the general public, its major form and content have been thoroughly defined'.[43]

The other factor that contributed to Botswana's success was the size of its population. Botswana is vast (the size of France) with a tiny population of around 1.8 million according to the 2001 population census. It is largely ethnically homogenous. The ruling class is correspondingly small. (The advantage is specific to Botswana; other smaller countries have been badly governed.) A small ruling class meant that competition for state resources was less intense. More importantly, small populations placed less pressure on the state for goods and services.[44]

For Wallis, Botswana 'is a small country with…relatively simple issues to resolve'.[45] However, its current problems were deep and profound with the emergence of HIV/Aids. And the need for economic diversification was equally daunting. Mineral revenues enabled the state to respond more easily to the moderate demands made on it.[46] As a result 'there is an absence of overloading on the input side of government which has also contributed to political stability and to the maintenance of the multiparty system'.[47] The state was able to satisfy the demands of the elite and, to some extent, the masses. Thus 'the government has managed to spread the benefits of [mineral led] growth widely enough to keep the population reasonably satisfied'.[48] Even then, without a 'conscious and disciplined leadership, no amount of diamond revenues would have been sufficient to make Botswana an African miracle'.[49] To understand the 'miracle' it was necessary to understand the critical role of the country's leaders.[50] Other countries with small populations – like Lesotho and Swaziland – had not been able to emulate Botswana's performance.

Wiseman emphasises good policy choices and a state formation that was not wasteful.[51] Good management helped Botswana avoid the trap of entrenching corruption, patronage and clientelism at the heart of its politics although the country was not entirely free of patronage, especially in senior appointments and in favouring the elite. That corruption remained at reasonable levels was attributed to the nature of the elite that assumed power at independence.[52] They were determined to ensure development. Cattle-farming had made them relatively wealthy and 'this class did not necessarily see the state as a source of self-enrichment'.[53] Power offered the possibility of influence rather than wealth (not that they didn't benefit from state resources too).

The result is that Botswana has been rated by Transparency International as the least corrupt country in Africa for 13 years in a row. It is also one of the most transparent.[54] Its ability to manage corruption has been recognised by such institutions as the Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance and the Worldwide Governance indicators of the World Bank.

Botswana has also been successful in managing the nexus between traditional and modern institutions. Some believe Africa's malaise arises from a failure to manage this nexus. Others believe traditional values are inimical to modern politics. But Botswana has struck a judicious balance between the two – a unique achievement, and a lesson for the continent. Its democracy rests on Tswana democratic traditions, especially those of consultation, participation and consensus building.[55] It is democracy adapted to local conditions. And the country's ability to integrate traditional and modern values partly explains why its democratic experiment is relatively successful.

The blending of traditional and modern extends to issues of leadership and presidential succession. Maundeni observes that succession in Botswana 'shows continuities with the ancient Tswana rules governing chieftaincy succession' where citizens have no say. In Tswana tradition, a chief is born and not made.[56] This has ensured a seamless succession for the BDP from Sir Seretse Khama to Ketumile Masire to Festus Mogae, and now to Lt-General Ian Khama. Moreover, political competition has not generated into the 'spoils politics' that have damaged other African states. In this context, Robert Rotberg classifies Botswana as 'the paragon of leadership excellence in Africa'.[57] On a continent which Rotberg assessed as having a 'leadership deficit', relatively good leaders and leadership transformed Botswana.

The country uses its mineral wealth to invest in infrastructural development and to provide social services such as health, education, clean water and road networks. Botswana demonstrates that governance can deliver on development promises notwithstanding the challenges it faces.

CHALLENGES TO THE IMAGE OF BOTSWANA

Botswana stands out in a continent that is largely afflicted by misery. However, its success is clouded by persistent poverty, unemployment, inequality, lack of economic diversification, absence of economic empowerment for citizens, and the challenge of HIV/Aids. The strong executive presidency is also harmful because it centralises power on the presidency and thus weakens and overshadows other institutions, in particular parliament. After many years of sustained and uninterrupted economic growth, about 47% of the population is believed to still live below the national poverty line.[58] This percentage is unacceptable in view of the years of economic growth and the small population. Nevertheless, Botswana has achieved much since independence and has outstripped other African countries.

There are not enough jobs. Unemployment is estimated at 23.8% but unofficial estimates put it higher.[59] Mining requires technology rather than labour. Despite its large contribution to gross domestic product (GDP), it provides less than 5% of formal sector employment.[60] The contribution from resource wealth is dented by inequitable distribution. While most benefit in one way or another, some seem to benefit more than others. The country has a Gini index of about 60.5[61], among the highest in the world. The index measures income inequality; the higher the figure, the more inequality. The situation should perhaps be given urgent attention lest it threatens the country's political stability in time to come.

Another challenge is over-reliance on mining, diamonds in particular. Mining accounts for about a third of GDP, about 80% of exports and about 50% of government revenue.[62] Botswana will be negatively affected by the global financial crisis that began in 2008, because of its dependence on mineral exports. The crisis has already led to a fall in demand for diamonds, closure of some mines, and loss of revenue and jobs.

Economic diversification has been a priority for years. Government made positive attempts to attract foreign direct investment, and created financial credit schemes to help local and international investors. But the diversification attempts were not very successful. Not enough investors were attracted and, of those that were, some later relocated and others collapsed. Problems included the country's landlocked location, making transport costs very high[63], and the small domestic market.[64] Government has not given up, however, and diversification remains a priority. Another priority is domestic economic empowerment. Several steps have been taken, including the establishment in 2001 of the Citizen Entrepreneurial Development Agency (CEDA). CEDA provides subsidised loans to Botswana citizens in all sectors of the economy.[65]

HIV/Aids constitutes another challenge. Its prevalence is estimated at 23.9% in the productive age group of 15–49.[66] Government response has been among the most radical in Africa. Under the leadership of Festus Mogae (1998–2008) Botswana became the first country on the continent to provide free anti-retrovirals (ARVs) to all who needed them. By 2007, 90% of HIV patients had access to ARVs. The state also provides free treatment to prevent the transmission of HIV from pregnant women to unborn babies.[67] It also provides free testing and takes care of HIV/Aids orphans.[68]

The treatment of minorities, the San/Basarwa in particular, has put an international spotlight on Botswana in recent years. In 2003, the Basarwa took the government to court to contest their relocation from ancestral lands in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) to settlements outside the reserve. In late 2006, the High Court ruled that the relocation was unconstitutional and the government accepted the ruling, allowing the Basarwa to return to the CKGR. But the political reverberations continue in some quarters.

Botswana has an excessively powerful, though not popularly elected, executive president. Section 47 (1) and (2) of the constitution states that 'the executive power of Botswana shall vest in the president…[who] shall, unless it is otherwise provided, act in his own deliberate judgment and shall not be obliged to follow the advice tendered by any other person or authority.'[69] These presidential powers overshadow parliament. Section 86 of the constitution states that 'parliament has power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of Botswana'.[70] To some extent, this excludes parliament from important governmental decision-making processes like concluding international treaties. It also plays no part in the appointment and removal of top state officers such as the ombudsman, director of the anti-corruption institution, secretary of the Independent Electoral Commission and the country's ambassadors. However, it is noteworthy that all presidents thus far have shown reluctance to use their constitutional powers negatively, choosing to consult on most issues of national concern. This suggests a common understanding of historical roots.

Presidential supremacy is reinforced by one-party dominance and a fragmented opposition. The BDP, in power since independence in 1966, has always had an absolute majority in parliament. The fragmented opposition has failed dismally to present itself as an alternative. Even when the BDP was evidently split into two factions, the opposition could not take advantage of it. The disarray led to vote-splitting and loss of some constituencies that might otherwise have been won.[71] Aggravating the problem is that opposition parties are poorly organised, with structures dormant most of the time.[72] There is a general lack of good leadership and resources.[73] Being in opposition since independence has also led to deep-seated frustrations among members. Because the opposition fails to offer the people a better alternative to the BDP, and because it is too weak to hold the executive to account in parliament, it poses a danger to the country's democracy.

Botswana is a member of the African Union, which embraced the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), 'as a blueprint for the continent's renewal'.[74] Nepad introduced a component called the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) in 2002. It aimed to strengthen governance standards in Africa by allowing peer review of processes in other countries. Despite its support for Nepad, Botswana has been reluctant to undergo the APRM, thus avoiding continental scrutiny. This stance suggests that government believes the country does not have much to learn from the exercise. It may be reinforced in this view by the fact that three organisations – Transparency International, the Worldwide Governance Indicators of the World Bank and the Mo Ibrahim African Index of Governance – have rated Botswana highly compared to most African countries, including those that have subjected themselves to the APRM.

CONCLUSION

The relative success of Botswana as a resource-rich country holds lessons for other African countries. After 42 years of independence, it has emerged differently from most countries in a continent marked by economic, political and social crises. In doing so, it has kept itself apart from much of Africa by transforming itself into a successful case of democratic development.

Notwithstanding its challenges and shortcomings, other countries can learn from Botswana. First, is the importance of democracy and good leadership in development. Other African countries are endowed with natural resources – some even more so than Botswana – but have not been able to use them for national development, largely because of poor leadership and contempt for democratic rule. With good leadership and proper management, natural resources can perform miracles. Despite limitations, most people in Botswana are better off than they were before the discovery of minerals. Minerals have brought positive development, not misery and bloodshed. Second, Botswana succeeded because it retained and trained skills in the public service, and developed a sound and integrated planning and budgetary process. Third, the country has maintained a judicious balance between traditional and modern institutions.

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