**DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING AND
DEVELOPMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL:**
Lessons from rural Botswana

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to understand the relationship between deliberative democracy, on the one hand, and local or community-level development on the other, with specific reference to Botswana. In essence, the paper seeks to answer the following two questions:

1. Can deliberative democracy and participation make development projects more community-oriented and community-based?

2. To what extent can deliberative democracy and participation at the local level democratise the formulation and implementation of development plans?

Deliberative democracy means both the process of consultation, debate and discussion among citizens and community groups, and the process of policy formulation and implementation involving state officials in consultation and partnership with community-level actors. For our purposes, development is understood to be the extension, by the state, of social services like health care, education, social welfare, the alleviation of poverty and inequality, and the provision of service-related infrastructure, rather than development exclusively in terms of economic growth. Our understanding of development, however, includes economic growth as it relates to the opportunities it creates for job creation and for stimulating aspects of social development and infrastructure investments.

The analysis of the link between deliberative democracy and development can perhaps be seen as part of the re-articulation of the developmental state; this is a state that is not merely interventionist in nature and in the manner in which it directs surpluses in the economy and spends its budget on social development, but is a state that is fundamentally democratic and participatory.

Much of the current discourse about development contends that sustainable development and positive change depend, inter alia, on the creation of participatory (and not merely representative) policy-making processes and spaces for citizens (Stiglitz 2002) where citizens can express their concerns and a vision of the kind of substantive improvements they would like to see in their socio-economic and socio-political conditions. Furthermore, the democratisation of public and policy discourses is seen as a means of ensuring that state officials are accountable to the constituencies that they represent. As Bangura and Hedberg (undated) suggest, "Democracy is seen as a good instrument of accountability and for improving public policy outcomes." The central issue of this paper is to establish to what extent this is indeed the case, particularly in the context of Botswana.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first situates the democracy-development nexus within a broader theoretical framework vis-à-vis participatory development. Within this broad scheme, the paper will address the questions posed above regarding whether or not deliberative processes can make development projects more community-oriented and community-based, and to what extent such deliberations and participation in the process of

deliberation, democratises the formulation and implementation processes of development plans. This section will draw on the available literature in this area. Section two will be directed at answering this question with particular reference to Botswana, drawing on fieldwork undertaken at the beginning of 2008. This fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews with representatives from the following community-based organisations:

- the Botswana Community-Based Organisations Network (BOCOBONET)

- the Thusano Lefatsheng Trust

- the Manyanya Development Trust.

A series of mini focus groups (three in total, two with three participants each and one with nine participants) were also conducted in the field, in both the urban centres and the rural/village settlements of Botswana.

2. DEMOCRATISING DEVELOPMENT PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

In an article on traditional governance and local democracy in India, Moore and Ananthpur (2007:8) point out that: "no state, however well developed, can dispense entirely with a degree of (non-state) local voluntarism", and hence emphasise the reality that grassroots/local institutions, in whatever form, are critical to mediating the relationship between the state and its citizens. Although referring specifically to local-level structures and institutions that administer local governance, this statement is equally true with respect to national level development planning and the implementation of such plans. What can be emphasised, however, is not merely that these institutions exist, and that they mediate the relationship between citizens and state – what may be an important consideration is how this mediatory role itself is structured. Such a consideration reveals not only the extent, to which participatory processes represent the interests of communities, but also the ways in which citizen preferences are made known to state officials, and the resulting impact they have on informing the direction and content of state activities. It is in this regard that the new discourse on participatory development and democratic governance argues that sustainable development depends on the incorporation of local perspectives on the nature and form of development. Such participation, enabled by democratic governance structures, is an important means through which to ensure the suitability of development initiatives for the contexts in which they are implemented. Hence the assertion by Sillitoe (1998: 224) that "it is increasingly recognised that development initiatives that pay attention to local perceptions and ways are more likely to be relevant to people's needs, and to generate sustainable interventions" (see also Jennings 2000; Rew 1999).

To correct the top-down, specialist- and technocrat-led development models of the past, the new development agenda – founded on the principles of citizen participation and engagement – would help to address and reverse the failures of the previous approaches to development.

Among the examples that are often cited to demonstrate the relative success of deliberative democratic structures interfacing state and community relations towards developmental ends, is Porto Alegre in Brazil. Here, local level involvement in the budgetary process, which spans the entire policy cycle (policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation) has been said to be the key factor accounting for the success of government policies vis-à-vis their responsiveness to community demands and priorities.

This new paradigm on participation and deliberative democracy, however, has received a convincing set of critiques, not least in terms of whether or not it actually accomplishes sustained improvements in the lives of development beneficiaries. The critiques also question the modes of engagement between the state and community-based organisations, and the unequal power relations that are often characteristic of such engagement processes. More importantly, the critiques focus on the internal structure and organisation of local-level forums and the form and extent of their representivity of the community at large. In the latter case, Crewe and Harrison (1998: 180) contend that "[many] espouse bottom-up participatory approaches to development, but with a romantic, even naïve, view of the formation and articulation of interests". Addressing the issue of differential access to information, knowledge, and the exercise of power, White (2000:143, emphasis original) cautions that *"sharing through participation does not necessarily mean sharing in power"*, either within local level structures and organisations, or between these structures and state officials.

These and other questions highlight an important – albeit rarely analysed – aspect of this discourse on deliberative democracy, namely the nature of the relationships between and within the state and within community deliberative forums, neither of which are homogenous.

What is most important is not so much whether or not people participate and deliberate, but what form this participation and deliberation takes, which stakeholders and interests are represented, and how such representation is determined (electorally or on some other basis). Rightly, as White (ibid) maintains, "the status of participation as a 'Hurrah' word, bringing a warm glow in its users and hearers, blocks its detailed examination. Its seeming transparency – appealing to 'the people' – masks the fact that participation can take on many forms and serve many different interests."

It is therefore essential to make the form of participation explicit, and acknowledge the different – and at times disparate – interests that might be represented in deliberative forums, not least because such an exercise dispels the illusion of a single, homogenous, and

undifferentiated entity of 'the community', and draws attention to the internal and external contestation of visions of development. This avoids the danger of assuming total consensus within the community regarding development priorities and the necessary interventions to achieve these; so also is the assumption that relations between state actors and community actors are characterised by equality in the extent and quality of participation. Baiocchi (1999) acknowledges the reality that social, political, economic, and even cultural relations of inequality exist and can therefore compromise the extent of participation of those sections of the community that are at the margins: "deliberative fora are likely to reproduce the kinds of inequalities of societies at large" (ibid: 11).

With regard to the nature and scope of participation, it is helpful to pay attention to White's (2000) four typologies of participation and the function each fulfils: (a) nominal, (b) instrumental, (c) representative, and (d) transformative participation. In terms of nominal participation, White argues that the function it fulfils is largely one of legitimating the content of development plans through the display of representivity and community involvement. Instrumental participation relies on community participation as a means towards stated ends for the purposes of efficiency through the utilisation of the skills and knowledge of community members. Representative participation is founded on the notion of giving a section of, or an entire community, a voice in the decision-making and implementation processes of policies that affect them. Finally, transformative participation is intended to alter the structures and institutions that lead to marginality and exclusion, the aim being to empower communities or sections thereof. We do not go into much detail about each of these forms of participation; suffice it to say that these are clearly ideal types, and in reality the type of participatory forum and the function it fulfils is likely to change throughout the policy process. It is conceivable that deliberation will be marked by continuing contestation between different stakeholders in an attempt to negotiate the terms, purpose, and content of their involvement in deliberative processes.

Similarly, addressing the issue of participation, its function, and its form, Baiocchi emphasises that the underlying vision that informs the decision to create inclusive, participatory policy forums sets the framework and the priorities for the nature of the engagement. Moreover, it is this underlying vision about the type of participation that determines the extent to which the deliberations are framed beyond the aegis of rationality and problem-solving, but fundamentally in terms of the empowerment of the poor and in pursuit of social justice. In addition, over and above the type of participation and its underlying vision, Baiocchi asserts that while the Porto Alegre case is instructive, there are important caveats to the wholesale adoption of this case as a complete vindication of deliberative democracy. The first relates to the issue of the underlying purpose of deliberation (empowerment, problem-solving, efficiency, or display). The second relates to the state's institutional capacity to deliver on its plans and those derived from deliberation in a timeous and efficient manner. And this, he points out, requires not just capacity in terms of personnel, but capacity also in terms of available financial resources, and the

autonomy of the state officials charged with implementing the plans to respond to, manage, and where necessary, circumvent the "potential adversarial relationships that these institutions may encounter" (Baiocchi, 1999: 38).

Although there is a large body of research (both theoretical and empirical) that supports the notion that deliberative democracy and participation can in fact make development plans more community-based and community-oriented, important critiques and caveats caution against an uncritical adoption of deliberation and participation as the panacea for responsive, sustainable, and accountable development. Issues around the quality, scope, and nature of participation have been highlighted as important factors that determine the extent to which participation and deliberation lead to the kind of development that responds to local/grassroots needs and priorities. In addition, issues of state capacity are also important, particularly in as far as this capacity relates to the timeous and efficient adoption and implementation of the resolutions derived from the process of deliberation. Ultimately, where the state lacks the financial or other means to implement even the most sophisticated and well-crafted community-centred development strategies, the true value of deliberation and participation is put to question. In the following section, we turn our attention to Botswana; this will attempt to address the question of the extent to which deliberative democracy and participation at the local level democratises the formulation and implementation of development plans.

3. DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE: THE CASE OF BOTSWANA

This section considers the structures and processes of democratic deliberation and participation that operate at the local level in Botswana, and analyses how and to what extent they democratise the formulation and implementation of development plans. We begin with a brief overview of some of the main development challenges that Botswana faces, drawing on data from the United Nations Development Programme. Thereafter we provide a sketch, and an analysis of the broad framework that informs and guides development priorities and plans in Botswana. The final section will provide a more detailed analysis of existing local level structures that have been introduced to include village level development concerns, and the processes/mechanisms by which these concerns are incorporated into national development plans. The specific limitations of these and other arrangements will be brought to light, particularly as these relate to how democratic the formulation and implementation of development plans are.

3.1 The socio-economic context of development in Botswana: brief background

This section draws in data from the 2000 Botswana Human Development Report, Towards an AIDS-free generation. Although another UNDP report was published more recently in 2005, it unfortunately does not have as much detailed data on social indicators as the 2000 Report, hence the use of the 2000 Report for our purposes. While this basic sketch is not comprehensive and detailed, it does enable us to see the some of the range of human development and service delivery deficits in Botswana, setting the scene for a better understanding of the context within which development is pursued and the issues that the national, district, and local development plans are aimed at addressing. It has been eight years since the publication of the Report from which our study draws its insights vis-a-vis social indicators, but our fieldwork and much of the recent research on development challenges in Botswana corroborates the picture that emerges from the 2000 Report.

Table 1 shows a graphic representation of the some of the basic human development indicators, disaggregating these in terms of national aggregates, as well as urban/rural disparities. Across all the indicators, it is clear that huge disparities exist between rural and urban areas – a most concerning situation given that most Batswana reside in rural areas. In addition, across all the indicators, rural households recorded deficits that were higher than the national average, with a national average of households without access to safe water at 23 per cent, where the rural proportion stands at 47 per cent. (Note that all urban households had safe water). The rate of income poverty, which stands at 29 per cent in urban areas, is almost double in rural areas, at 55 per cent. This points to the high levels of income inequality1 that persist in Botswana, a source of concern and disgruntlement highlighted by respondents from the field interviews.

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[1] the overall gini co-efficient measuring levels of inequality, pits Botswana at 60.5 (Human Development Report 2007/2008), one of the highest inequality rates in the world
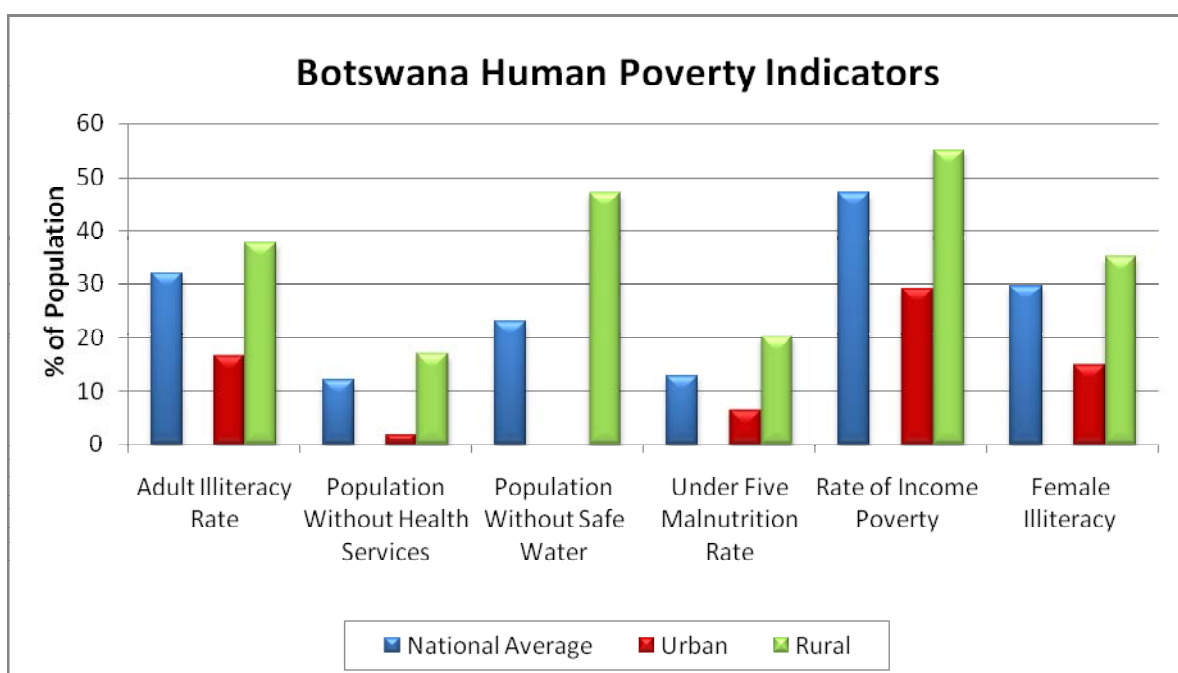
Botswana Human Poverty Indicators

Table 1: Data sourced from UNDP Botswana HDI Report (2000)

It is interesting to note, however, that most Batswana have access to health services, with less than 17 per cent of rural households without such access. By all accounts this is a laudable achievement on the part of the state, though more in-depth analyses on the quality and scope of health care could possibly present a more balanced picture by bringing to bear where the main improvements in the health sector have taken place. An unexpected deviation from the urban bias in service delivery and access to social provisioning is found in the data on immunisations, where although rural areas still lag behind urban areas in terms of full immunisation, TB and measles immunisation is higher in the rural than urban areas (Table 2).
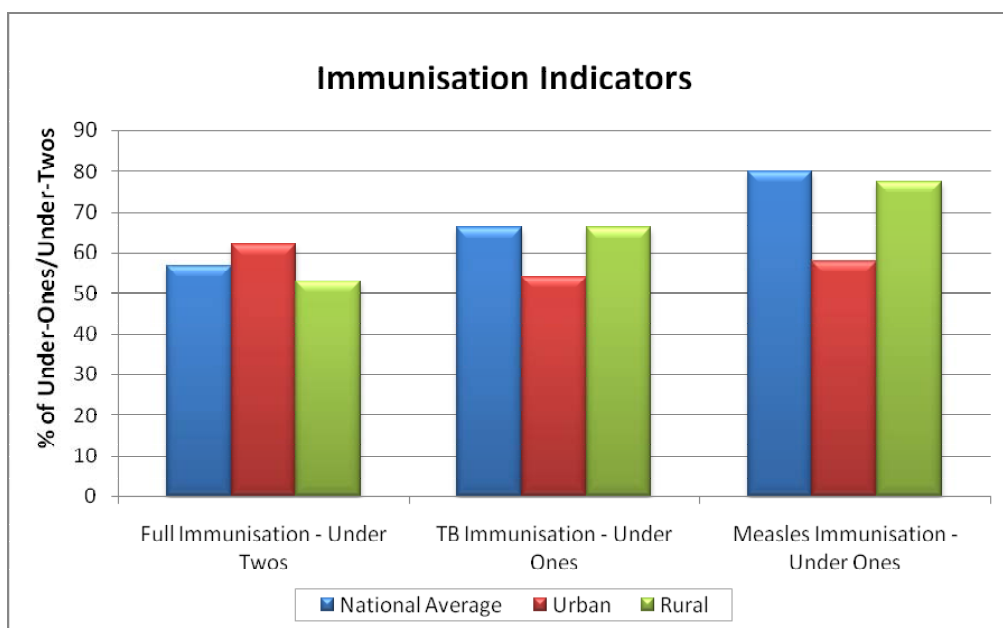
Immunisation Indicators

Table 2: Data sourced from UNDP Botswana HDI Report (2000)

Data illustrating the number of births unattended by a health professional shows significant declines over the past three decades, an outcome that clearly correlates with increases in public expenditure more generally, but in particular with reference to increases in the budgetary allocations for the health and education sectors (Tables 2, 3, and 4).

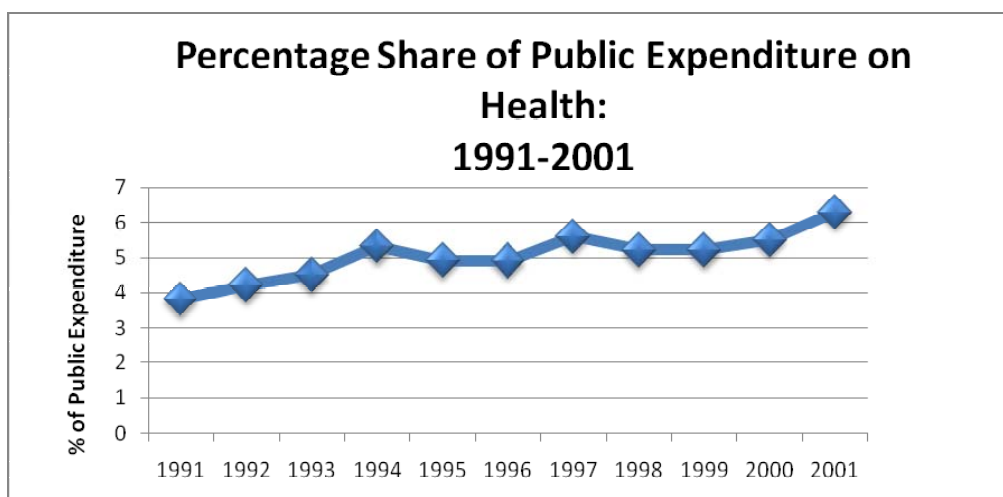**Percentage Share of Public Expenditure on Health:
1991-2001**

Table 3: Data sourced from UNDP Botswana HDI Report (2000)

The massive declines recorded in the number of births that were not attended by a health professional is thus a clear indication of important improvements in social provisioning with regards to health services (Table 4).
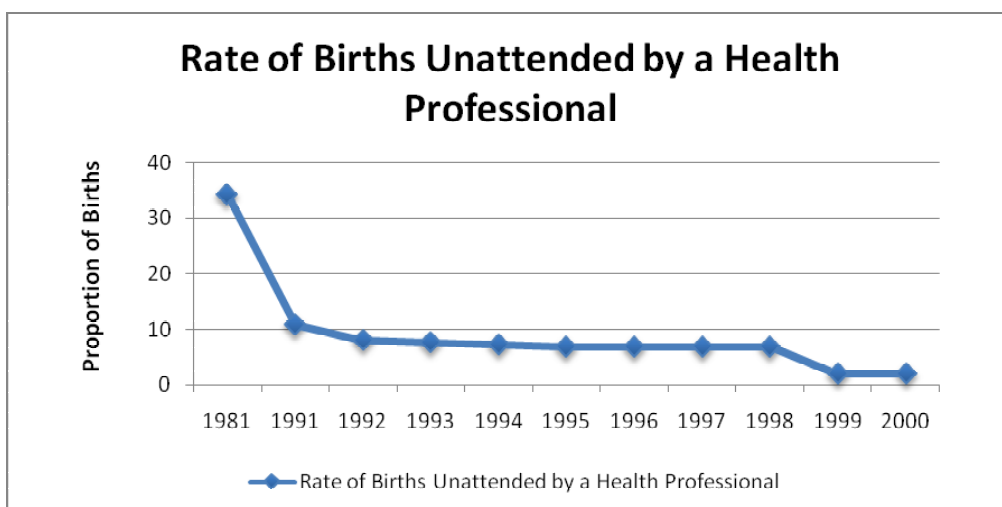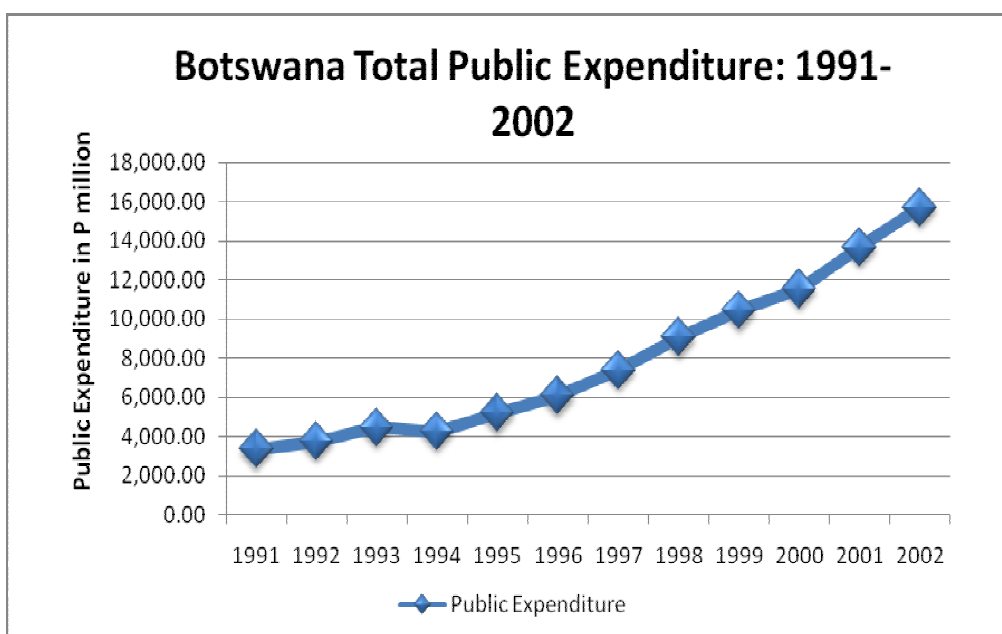
Table 4: Data sourced from UNDP Botswana HDI Report (2000)

Table 5: Data sourced from UNDP Botswana HDI Report (2000)

Table 5 shows the massive declines in adult illiteracy that have accompanied rising public expenditure on education.
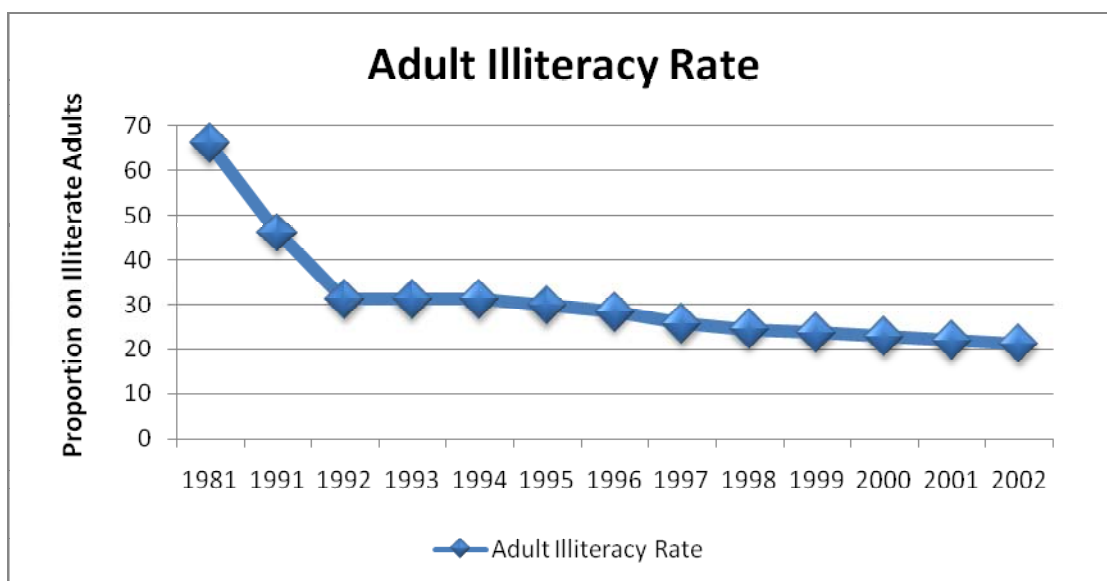
Adult Illiteracy Rate

Table 6: Data sourced from UNDP Botswana HDI Report (2000)

What insights can thus be drawn from this data? It is clear that the government of Botswana has made noteworthy improvements in a number of areas, especially health care and education. However, clear inequalities in terms of the access to social services, particularly access to safe water, persist, and these inequalities are spatial in nature; that is, they correspond with urban and rural location. Thus, those in rural areas are not only the least likely to have access to safe water and proper sanitation, but they are also the ones least likely to have an income. This correlation between income poverty and spatial settlement (rural versus urban) can be interpreted to signify the lack of employment and other income-generating opportunities for rural populations, a situation that, as can be expected, is likely to lead to outward migration from rural areas, placing ever greater pressures on available resources and services in urban centres. The meaningful – albeit spatially and geographically unequal – gains that have been made in the health and education sectors have come under significant strain over the past decade with the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, where one in four Batswana are infected with the virus. Although not specifically analysed, it is important to bear this in mind, and attempt to shape part of the vision on community-oriented development in Botswana around effective responses to the epidemic. Given these factors, especially the rural/urban service delivery gap, we turn now to an analysis of the existing deliberative and participatory fora in rural Botswana in an attempt to examine the mechanisms by which development issues at the local level are incorporated into the macro vision of development, and some of the challenges in achieving it.

4. THE MACRO FRAMEWORK OF DEVELOPMENT: NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS AND VISION 2016

The political system in Botswana has been sustained since pre-independence times through reliance on the traditional institutions at the village level in the *kgotla*. This is a public meeting or traditional court of law, usually headed by the village chief, in which deliberations are conducted and decisions are arrived at by consensus. All residents in a village are entitled to attend and are allowed to speak. Interestingly, as a participatory mechanism it has both a deliberative function and a decisive function. In reality it is dominated by the chiefs but has "allowed a measure of communication and consultation though it has the tendency to prop up forms of governance that are at variance with representative democratic practices" (Lodge, Kadima and Pottie D (eds): 2002: 31).

The *kgotlas* are extensively used as a facilitating process for the crafting of the District and National Development Plans, and forms one of the cornerstones of the community development and social integration initiatives of the Botswana Government. Of late though, participation levels in *kgotlas* have been in decline, due to the rapid urbanisation and modernisation of the society. An important factor in declining rates of participation in these meetings is the perception that they can be captured by certain interest groups in the village and that they do not play as effective a role as they used to in the past. In part this is blamed on traditional leaders, as evidenced by one of the interview respondents reproduced below and brings into relief the sharpening tensions between tradition and modernity in Botswana. We cite these two extracts from the semi-structured interviews since they thematically raise all of the concerns that we detail in the narrative of the paper.

> The kgotlas serve as stakeholder meetings and ought to serve the whole community. The kgotlas are sometimes gate kept, and held to ransom by political considerations of processes and are dominated by relative elites – either the chief, the village development committee or some of its members but this is not generalisable, as different dynamics exist in different places- where in some places the system works very well, and in others that is not the case[2].

> There is some emerging conflict between tradition and modernity – especially with regard to the role and function of traditional leaders. One view suggests that Traditional leaders do not fulfil the community service functions they used to, pre-independence. They do not act as the custodians of community well being, and use the powers given to them by custom but do not care for the community in the sense that they are the last port of call for community members when they are in need of assistance. People feel reluctant to come to the kgotla and many have moved away from their villages to towns and that. Overall it means that people are accessing the system less and less.[3]

Since its independence in 1966, Botswana has developed an elaborate system of development planning, and produced five-year National Development Plans to articulate government policies and prioritise development initiatives. These Plans are enshrined in law and are processed through parliament, which means, effectively, that a development project

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[2] All the respondents from the semi-structured interviews made similar points. This direct quote is from semi-structured interview 2, as marked in the bibliography.
[3] semi-structured interview 1.

cannot be implemented if it is not in the legislated Development Plan, and any periodic modifications, which have to be fully justified, also have to be approved by Parliament (Mogae 2005).

Community development became the focus of the Botswana government from the very inception of independence, as the first Botswana Development Plan (Ferguson Brown 1996) acknowledged the importance of community development in Botswana and gave it institutional and organisational form by legislating it and making it a function in the community development department; the facilitation of community development was a role assigned to social workers employed by the department.

The Independence year was a drought year in which the very first community development plan was promulgated, which was a food-for-work project. In tracing the beginnings and evolution of Botswana's approach to development, Ferguson-Brown (1996: 70) illustrates that:

> (By) 1967, 320 such projects had been completed and another 500 around the country were under way, in which 250 miles of road were laid, 360 acres of land cleared for ploughing and almost 100 teachers' houses, 30 classrooms, and 40 dams been built.

Ferguson-Brown further argues that while this may have been an impressive contribution to the development of Botswana, the responsibility for implementation had been that of community development workers hired by the newly established Community Development Department. Moreover, while communities were involved in the implementation of such community development projects, the process did not allow for clear community objectives to be established, thus taking away the agency of communities to define for themselves what the terms and objectives of these efforts ought to be (Ferguson Brown 1996). As such, these interventions represented a 'professionalisation' of community development and fostered a top-down, rather than a bottom-up approach, an approach that was further cemented when a presidential directive established Village Development Committees in 1968. This, as Ferguson-Brown contends, in turn sent an overall signal that while the Botswana government encouraged through this initiative the ideal of 'self-help' and 'self-development', this initiative was paternalistically oriented, which further served to erode the kind of self determination required for organic grassroots development.

The first development plan was the Transitional Plan for Social and Economic Development (1966-68), followed by the National Development Plan (1968-73). Botswana is currently implementing National Development Plan (NDP 9), 2003/04-2008/09. NDP9 is the first Development Plan to be formulated after adoption of Vision 2016, which serves as "a guide to the formulation of all subsequent Development Plans" (Government of Botswana, 2007: 20). "The Plans, coupled with transparency, accountability and commitment to abide by the Plans, helped Government to access significant levels of Official Development Assistance and technical assistance" (Mogae 2007). The NDP's thus represent the macro framework within which Botswana's development is pursued, and they lay the foundation upon which tangible interventions are advanced. Like all such development plans globally, the NDP's are essentially technical documents, drafted by experts and later approved by elected representatives (Taylor 2002).

At the next level are the District Development Plans (DDPs), which are an elaboration of the NDPs, but operate at the level of district concerns and priorities. At the moment, Botswana is in the process of beginning consultations for developing National Development Plan 10 and District Development Plan 7. Thus far however, there have been no local level or village development plans. There is some civil society mobilisation afoot, through local development agencies and local development trusts, for the formulation of a Village Development Plan 1. In terms of the process of drawing up National Development Plans, Village Development Committees (VDCs) are tasked with the responsibility of drawing up village development plans. The inputs of each individual village are then collated into a coherent district level plan, which is then fed through to the national level. Below is a diagrammatic representation of the formulation process of the Development Plans.
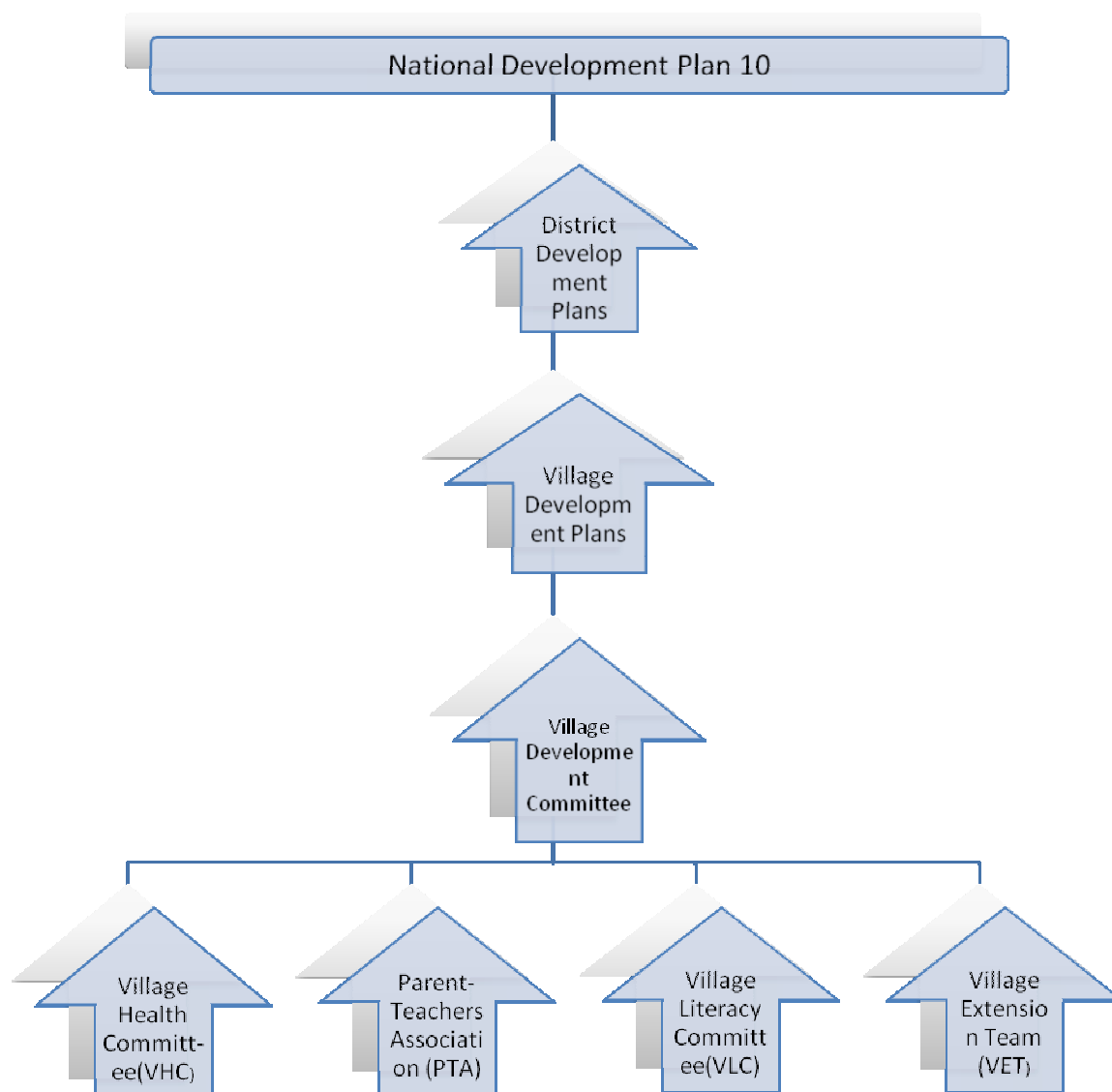
Adapted from Serema (2002): 'Community Information Structures in Botswana: Challenges for Librarians'

It should be noted that these development plans are not pursued within a vacuum, but form the basic building blocks towards the fulfilment of Botswana's Long Term Vision (Vision 2016), which was adopted in 1997. Vision 2016 serves as the principal guide for the governance of the country and provides the framework within which to address the (development) challenges that face it. "It guides all political, social and economic activities, including the National Development Plans, whose objective is to attain sustained development, rapid economic growth, economic independence and social justice." (Government of Botswana, 2007: 18)

As can be expected, this intricate planning process often proves cumbersome, with the result that many of the local inputs do not eventually find their way into the National and District Development plans. Furthermore, although this three-tiered process seems ideal, it does have serious shortcomings.

> Each village's development has to be consistent with that articulated in the National and District development plans – as they are drawn up through a consultative process involving input from each village development committee. The National and District development plan

is then legislated and becomes an Act of Parliament. Thus, all local/village development plans have to be consistent with them or they would be impossible to implement as they would be illegal. So local-specific issues can't be catered for.[4]

We return to this critique when looking more closely at the Village Development Committees and attempts to create Village Development Plans.

5. THE MICRO CONTEXT: VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEES AND THE LIMITS OF PARTICIPATION AND DELIBERATION

Earlier, we pointed out that Botswana is currently in the process of agitating for its very first VDPs to be incepted. The VDCs represent the chief mechanism through which citizen engagement and participation in village development planning, as well as the formulation and implementation of these plans, is institutionalised. Although increasingly, VDCs are encouraged to assume the role of a direct facilitating mechanism for participation and deliberation on local-level community development, they were initially created in 1968 by a presidential directive as an implementation mechanism for development plans, especially for the co-ordination of drought-relief programmes. They were thus responsible for all village development matters and the co-ordination of all village development activities (Serema 2002), not as consultative fora but as implementers of plans developed by the central government. As Ferguson-Brown (1996: 73/74) notes, they were a means "through which the support of the people for development could be sought ... often decisions about development [were] taken for the people, even at a local level, rather than by the people".

Only recently, with the recognition of the top-down and paternalistic nature (ibid) of previous development interventions has there been an attempt at repositioning the VDCs as consultative and deliberative structures through which to reach broad consensus among villagers about village development priorities. In doing this, the VDCs utilise existing deliberative structures, i.e. the *kgotla*[5], to bring the 10 elected VDC Committee members into contact with stakeholders and representatives of village groups, traditional leaders, and state officials from the district, and where appropriate, from the national level. They are thus run on the same principles and on the same basis as the *kgotla*, meaning that they have to facilitate the fullest participation and involvement of all villagers (for an elaboration of the function and organisation of the *kgotla*, as well as some of the strengths and weaknesses of the system, see Boggs 2000 and Van Binsbergen 1995). The internal dynamics of each village, – which set the backdrop against which these committees are created and function – as well as the fundamental character of the *kgotla* can at times impose limitations on the scope of participation and involvement of important stakeholders and village constituencies.

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[4] semi-structured interview 3.
[5] A traditional meeting place comparable to what can be termed a village parliament presided over by the chief. It allows for frank and public exchanges of views on non-partisan issues (Mpabanga et al, 2007).

Indeed, the critiques that apply to participatory fora and participatory mechanisms set out in the first section of this paper, apply here too. In particular, because direct participation is facilitated by and through the *kgotla* – those who are close to the chief or the chiefs themselves usually dominate the deliberations over the Development Plans. The relatively better resourced, relatively better educated and other local community dynamics may mean that some voices are marginal in the process, if not completely excluded from the consultations of the *kgotla* on the development plans. As noted during field interviews, "the *kgotlas* serve as stakeholder meetings and ought to serve the whole community"[6]; however, the capacity of the *kgotlas* to represent the broad rage of issues and interests that they ought to represent is at times compromised by political considerations, with meetings being dominated by relative elites – the chief, the village development committee, or some of its members. That chiefs and deputy chiefs take simultaneously leading roles within the community, the *kgotla*, and the VDCs, poses an additional problem in which some individuals vested with traditional authority and power are invested with even more power through active participation in and presiding over the activities of the VDCs and the *kgotlas* simultaneously. The implications for defining these processes as elite-driven then become clearer.

The vulnerability of the *kgotla* in respect of political/factional capture clearly poses a similar threat to the VDCs, and brings into question, the notion of equal and meaningful participation among the villagers, minority ethnic groupings in particular. In this regard, the position of ethnic minorities like the Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi pose an interesting challenge for the extent of participation among some of the most impoverished members of village communities. In their research on the role of ethnic identity and the extent to which it structures the socio-political and socio-economic relations in Botswana, Mompati and Prinsen (2000: 628) found that "as an almost inevitable consequence of ... ethnic power imbalances, subordinate ethnic groups were systematically impoverished by being denied the right to own cattle and access to land and water." Not only this, but even their right to participate in village forums was particularly diminished, owing to past and current structural relations of subordination within villages (ibid). During their research, which involved attending *kgotla* sessions, Mompati and Prinsen (2000:630) also found that the spatial and seating arrangements at the kgotla reflected these social inequalities, observing that:

> the kgosi [chief] sat in front surrounded by his advisors ... immediately behind the chief's advisors sat the merafe [residents belonging to the major ethnic groupings like the Bakgatla, the Barolong, the Bakwena etc] and behind them the meratshwana [those like the Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi] ... the male members of subordinate groups hardly ever spoke unless directly spoken to.

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[6] semi-structured interview 2.

Equally striking is Mompati and Prinsen's observation that much like those identified as the *meratshwana*, women and young people hardly spoke during *kgotla* (See also *The Courier ACP-EU*, No.198; Siphambe 2003; Mpabanga et al 2007). According to Siphambe, structural factors militating against the participation of ethnic minorities and women are strongly correlated to the material condition of these groups, amongst whom poverty levels tend to be higher: "there is a limitation to effective participation in Botswana, especially by the minority tribes and women, who also happen to be among the top of the list of those mentioned ... as being the most vulnerable to poverty" (ibid: 22). To what extent the facilitation of debate and deliberation about village development should continue to take place through the *kgotla* is an important consideration, especially in a context where underlying structural and cultural constraints can seemingly hamper the capacity of some sections of the community to substantively participate in these deliberations.

The second critique of the process of crafting the development plans is that they can potentially limit the ability of village/local development plans to cater and be responsive to local particularities, circumstances, and development challenges. While the overall logic of legislating development plans appears sound, since it attempts to foster coherence and uniformity and maintain national standards by promoting the idea of equality, it may nonetheless undermine equity. Without taking the importance of formulating and maintaining national standards for granted, it is crucial also to ensure that such standardisation does not lead to unequal outcomes, since Botswana, like many other countries, suffers from regional inequalities. A standard national development template might therefore hinder the formulation of interventions that are, in practice, unequal, but are nevertheless necessary to promote equality in outcomes. Furthermore, the central planning process and the requirement for conformity to national standards has at times proved to be overly rigid and is a theme that runs through criticisms of the National Development Planning process. The rigidity of the legislated process, in addition to its inability to be responsive to the variety of specific local needs, has also introduced significant anomalies in the coherence and integration of policy processes that the Planning process informs. One focus group respondent cited the following:

> There is also a need for the harmonization and standardization of policies. Policies are sometime conflicting. They need to suite the conditions and the culture of Botswana. For example, if one goes to the land board to apply for land, they will not allocate to you if you do not have proof of a water source. If then one goes to apply for a permit to drill a borehole or draw water from a source – they will only provide a permit if you can provide proof of where or provide an address on where the water will be used as irrigation or whatever, but you don't have the land yet so you wont get the water and because you don't have the water you won't get the land.[7]

That said, however, the drive for national cohesion and the elaboration of a centrally-planned development programme has been used to good effect as seen in the country's Human Development Index ratings, and the extension of social services. This problem of the

lack of locality-specific development is not only related to the national standardisation of development plans, but can also be seen as an outcome of the prioritisation of party political interests over local ones. As noted by Kgosi Mangope,

> "sometimes the politicians implement their party programmes which are not part of our development plans"[8] with another respondent confirming this and in addition stressing that "political leaders, instead of facilitating development, often behave in ways in which they seek to own, manage, and control development processes."[9]

This lack of congruence between politicians' priorities compared to those of local communities seems also to be related to the lack of co-ordination and proper linkages within the state apparatus itself; i.e. in terms of co-ordination among state officials at the different levels of government – from the national to the district level and right through to the sub-district and village/township level. This view of a lack of intra-governmental co-ordination was not shared by all the respondents in our interviews, however, as some highlighted that

> "in general, the past fifteen years have seen improvements in democracy and accountability. The local council, the MPs and the community collaborate well together; village-level committees interact with other structures."[10]

This positive assessment is perhaps not surprising given the geographical location of Mahalapye, which is situated along the main road linking Gaborone, the capital city, and Francistown, which is the second-largest town in Botswana and has the main air and road transport routes. During the three-day period of compiling our fieldwork, there was evidence in the sub-district of road and rail network extensions and refurbishments that link this district to the capital, Gaborone, and to Francistown. Such infrastructural projects should not, however, be interpreted as indicative of similar levels of service delivery in other spheres, since these developments were directly linked to the opening of a coal mine in the area. What accounts for the road and railway project extensions and refurbishments then probably has more to do with supporting infrastructure related to the expansion on the extractive industries, such as mining which dominates the economic landscape of Botswana. It is understood that this, in theory, brings potential benefits to citizens of Botswana in that from a policy perspective, perhaps this is a planning strategy that integrates and co-ordinates investment in infrastructure projects wisely, in that it does demonstrate a more sustainable use of scarce resources through a broader planning process. It does, however, mean that until and unless districts begin to attract investment from private sources, infrastructural development to citizens alone will be delayed. In addition, in the context of high levels of inequality and the inability of local citizens to make use of the rail and road infrastructure means that the ability of citizens to benefit from these developments is

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[7] respondent: focus group 2.
[8] respondent: focus group 1.
[9] semi-structured interview 1.
[10] respondent: focus group 2.

limited. In addition one respondent from the fieldwork research made a telling, if generational, evaluation of the tangible benefits such developments are assumed to bring:

> …yes there is a road and rail extension, but I don't have a car, I have no use for that Road, what can it bring for me? I want an opportunity for a job, or to start a business, There are no opportunities for me to do that. How does the tarred Road help us. Many here don't have cars."[11]

It was also cited in one semi-structured interview "that the Development Plans at the moment are too remote and distant and thus are made on the basis of no accurate and reliable data."[12] This may also be attributable to declining levels of participation in the *kgotla* as cited by an interview respondent, and with such decreasing levels of participation, the richness and complexity of needs, views, and desires of village and town dwellers are not heard. Alternatively, this may also mean that the current elaborate planning process itself, though it served Botswana well in the formative years of its development, is an inappropriate mode of planning in an increasingly urbanising and modernising state and society.

Compounding the lack of adequate information and data to inform the content of development plans and the remoteness of the planning process from the local level, one respondent during our focus groups revealed that although there are elected representatives (like members of parliament, local councillors, and other political representatives) that community members know,

> the problem is that people don't know what their role and function is. There is a great need for civic education on their roles and responsibilities and how communities can interact with them.[13]

This is concerning, not only because it clearly points to weakness in the linkages between the various levels of the state and the constituencies that they serve – a situation that poses huge challenges for the effective transmission of the requisite information about village-/local-level development concerns all the way up to the national level. More problematic is the seeming failure of the VDCs in general, particularly in their new role as deliberative platforms that bring together different interest groups in the development planning process. What the statement alludes to is that while consultative and deliberative forums are important, they are unlikely to encourage and nurture the kind of substantive interaction/engagement between state representatives, traditional leaders, and community members that effective community level planning requires.

Another communication challenge, which impedes the strengthening of the linkages between state officials at the national and the district levels and villagers (and hence proximity between them) is the problem of language. Serema (2002: 4) highlights this problem, stating that "sometimes [VDCs] are given major reports like the Village Development Plan to read and to verify certain things and comment ... it is not always easy

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[11]respondent: focus group 3.
[12] semi-structured interview 1.

for [VDC members] to read and understand these reports." Although not seen as an important feature of how 'development' is done, or how it is communicated, language clearly plays an important role in enabling communication and fostering basic understanding of key issues through genuine dialogue. Where development plans and possible policies are formulated in a language that some people who participate in the deliberations do not understand, involvement is likely to be discouraged instead of being promoted.

Noting this neglected aspect of development planning and communication, Robinson (1996: 4) rightly points out that "at the heart of the development process are relationships, the cultural context, the parameters of communication. Language is one such parameter." Although referring specifically to minority languages and the failure to create communication and dialogue through these, as well as the more dominant language, this observation and critique is nevertheless a cogent one in the context of Botswana where not all the Batswana can read, write, and communicate effectively in English. Although the government provides for the publication of all documentation in both English and SeTswana, it is clear from the example cited above that this linguistic duality is not always observed at the local level, creating significant barriers to the capacity of all to interact with elected officials and representatives. Mpabanga et al (2007: 39/40) make a similar point, drawing attention to the fact that "local officials addressed public meetings in the English language which the public hardly understood. [This and other factors] contributed to poor attendance of meetings and constrained widespread participation."

The organisational weaknesses of the VDCs seem to relate mainly to the following issues. Firstly, although heralded as a model for local-level deliberation and consultations, the *kgotla* system in its current form seems somewhat inadequate as a mechanism for facilitating broad participation since it is vulnerable to political and factional capture, and has tended to reproduce/re-enact the gender and ethnic-based exclusions prevalent in Batswana society. As a channel for participation, it facilitates the involvement of those who are historically, culturally, politically, socially, and economically privileged, a situation that undoubtedly has an impact on the development vision and priorities that are articulated. To this end, the kind of participation that is emerges in this context is much like that described by White (2000) as nominal participation, where the purpose is to legitimate the process of planning by giving the appearance of inclusivity, when in fact, there is no substantive participation, particularly by the marginalised and excluded.

A second weakness of the VDCs is related to the weak linkages between itself and government structures at the local and district levels. Although some of the respondents during the field interviews were of the view that VDCs interact well with government structures, most of the respondents held a contrary view, highlighting the distance between local councillors and other elected representatives, on the one hand, and villagers on the

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[13] respondent: focus group 1.

other. The failure of elected representatives to attend *kgotla* meetings frequently, as well as their failure to execute functions beyond their official/formal scope of responsibilities, was similarly cited as important factors accounting for the weak links between communities and their representatives.

That respondents continuously stressed the roles and responsibilities of elected officials rather than those of VDC members with regard to local development issues can be interpreted as a lack of confidence in the VDCs as drivers of a local development agenda. Incisive in this regard is a statement made by one of the respondents in Dutlwe, a village in Kwaneng District:

> MPs and local councillors do not do what communities want them to do. Their representative function is weak. We would prefer some kind of oversight body to oversee what is happening in each village."[14]

One would have expected that respondents would point out the relationship between VDCs and elected representatives as a key mechanism through which to ensure that MPs and councillors respond to local needs and demands. It should perhaps not come as too much of a surprise that more direct access to elected officials is sought, rather than deliberation through VDCs, given the historical paternalism of the government in Botswana with regard to matters of development, even at the local level. To date, the government is seen as the chief instrument for service delivery and development. Moreover, given the weakening *kgotla* system (as evidenced by decreasing attendance levels) where the perception is that

> Traditional leaders who preside over the kgotla and hence also over the VDC deliberations do not fulfil the community service functions they used to … they do not act as custodians of community well-being."[15]

As noted by Sharma (2005) "there is a general feeling that consultation undertaken at the kgotla is ceremonial as the government uses this forum primarily for legitimizing decisions made elsewhere."

Another issue that was emphasised was the lack of information on the part of communities regarding the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives. Thus, even where VDCs are effective deliberative mechanisms, the fact that communities do not have the necessary information that will help them to engage more effectively with elected representatives compromises the extent to which VDCs can act as a two-way exchange of knowledge and ideas about development. Field respondents constantly highlighted this information deficit and asymmetry, arguing that "there is a great need for civic education on their [elected representatives'] roles and functions and how communities can interact with

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[14] respondent: focus group 3.
[15] semi-structured interview 1.

them."[16] This lack of information not only relates to insufficient understanding of the roles of elected officials, but also to the general unavailability of accurate data detailing the levels and areas of under-development at the local level.

6. CONCLUSION

It remains somewhat unclear to what extent VDCs have contributed to the elaboration of a local development agenda that is deliberative and participatory, and that leads to the formulation and implementation of development plans that are community-based and oriented towards community needs and interests. While our analysis of available data indicates and confirms that Botswana's economic growth trajectory since independence has, in general, had a positive impact on government expenditure in the areas of health care and education, it is also clear from the data, field interviews, and field observations that there are still important service delivery backlogs, most of which are in rural areas. What seems to be the case is that much of the paternalistic, government bureaucrat and technocrat-directed post-independence development agenda has been hard to replace with substantive bottom-up facilitation and direction of development projects. If anything, it would appear that the capacity of village-level deliberative structures to enable local interests to shape the direction and content of development interventions remains largely unfulfilled, with the quality and extent of 'participation' being nominal; that is, for the purposes of display and legitimation rather than deliberation on policy options and the democratisation of policy formulation and implementation processes.

There is, however, potential for the VDCs to fulfil the role of a consultative and deliberative mechanism through which to genuinely facilitate the participation of community members in village development matters. The challenge is to ensure that existing structures and the often exclusionary patterns of participation that become entrenched become gradually replaced with more transformative engagement models that empower all the members of communities to deliberate with elected and traditional representatives towards the formulation and implementation of local development programmes that respond to local needs. Furthermore, the information and communication structures within communities, between communities and their representatives, as well as between the different levels of government (national, district, sub-district, township/village) will need to be enhanced in order for deliberations on development to correspond with real needs and priority areas. How the standardisation of development towards Vision 2016 will be achieved without compromising the quality and direction of development as articulated by communities at the grassroots level is a matter that will require finer review, keeping in mind also that the 'local' is not a single homogenous entity, but a space characterised by different and at times competing interests.

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[16] respondent: focus group 1.

The above considerations notwithstanding, it is possible to argue that Botswana's framework for development, organised into a series of national, district, and – not yet formulated –VDPs has in many areas played an important role in the country's impressive economic growth, improvements in human development indicators and the promotion of political stability and social cohesion through a structured and goal-oriented approach to development since 1971. Indeed there are many challenges that remain, including the socio-economic impact of HIV/AIDS and a predominantly mineral-based economy that has created limited employment opportunities for the rural poor. Perhaps an invigorated, community-based, transparent and democratic planning process, driven through VDPs, presents a viable option and model for dealing with the development challenges facing Botswana and other developing countries in Southern Africa.

7. APPENDIX 1

Fieldwork:

FOCUS GROUPS	**Focus group 1: 28 January 2008. Manyanya** **Participants:** 1. Deputy Chief Kgosi Mangope: 2. Conservation Committee officer Village Development Committee 3. Secretary of the Village Development Committee **Focus group 2: 29 January 2008. Serowe District – Mahalapye Sub District.** **Participants:** 1. Principal Adult Education Officer 2. Senior Adult Education Assistant 3. Dibete Development Trust. **Focus group 3: 30 January 2008. Dutlwe Community** **Participants:** 1.Attendees of the village Kgotla (6 people) 2. Dutlwe Development Trust 3.Official from the Land Board
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS	**28 January 2008.** 1.Mabei A. – Director: Botswana Community Based Organisations Network (BOCOBONET) 2. Matlhare T. Thusano Lefatsheng Trust 3. Sethibe T.S. Manyanya Community Development Trust

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